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Museum honors teacher who led Rocket Club at Josey High School

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By Kelly Jasper
Staff Writer
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It was 1964 in segregated Augusta when a group of young men from the new black high school in town gathered outside to launch rockets they had built high into the air.

They called it Rocket Club, and it was a place of innovation and creativity, a refuge for self-described nerds and curious T.W. Josey High School students in the heat of the space race.

They were led by Rosa T. Beard, an educator known for a half-century of work with the Rosa T. Beard Debutante Club for girls, but she was also mentor for boys, especially those in the Rocket Club.

"She saw the potential of those young men. She squeezed every bit of good out of them to try and propel them to their greatest potential," said Mallory K. Millender, who taught alongside Beard at Josey and is now a historian and professor at Paine College, which he and Beard attended.

Beard accepted an award Tuesday at The Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History recognizing a lifetime of service to the Augusta community.

The standing-room only crowd included a handful of former students and Rocket Club members, many of whom went on to pursue careers in science and government, becoming community pillars like Beard. The club's alumni include an ambassador, ministers and a Superior Court judge. They became scientists, doctors and military officers. One worked at Cape Canaveral and another for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

They tinkered with rockets well before Josey, as early as 1958, as students of A.R. Johnson Junior High. But it wasn't until Beard became their adviser in 1962 and Josey opened in 1964 that the program took off.

BEFORE THEN, THE boys built model rockets with pre-manufactured engines. Under Beard's influence, they began to design and build their own engines and make their own rocket fuel.

"During the early '60s, aeronautics was the going thing. It launched us into so many areas of science," said Frank Johnson, a member who now lives in Lithonia, Ga., and is a sales manager for Globe Chemical Co.

They explored biology after another student, Joseph Hobbs, suggested experiments with mice, which were placed in the payload of rockets, near the nose.

"We figured NASA could do it. Why couldn't we?" Johnson said.

They lost a few, but plenty parachuted back to safety after the launch.

Hobbs is now chairman of the Department of Family Medicine at Medical College of Georgia.

In the club's heyday, the medical college loaned albino Swiss mice for the experiments. The boys would travel to the college after school to run tests and teach the mice to run mazes. They collected blood samples and measured glucose levels to determine the effect of acceleration -- such as that of a rocket launch -- would have.

They toured Cape Canaveral and Lockheed Martin Marietta, an aeronautics facility, on field trips. Some of the scientists and engineers they met were black, Hobbs said.

"I began to say I want to be like them," he said. "We realized how fortunate we were. We had the benefit of many teachers who were extremely good at advocating science education for minorities."

For a while, the group launched rockets weekly from the field where Josey's stadium now stands. Their greatest accomplishment was a 6-foot rocket that flew 1,500 feet toward space.

The boys showed it off at science fairs, winning local and national prizes. They were a competitive group in everything, from marbles to basketball, and especially science, Hobbs said.

"Mrs. Beard drove that competitiveness by getting us involved in science fairs. Because of what she did, and the unique collection of kids who were there, and the fact that we had this place called Rocket Club to gather, we were able to do unordinary things," he said. "We perceived ourselves as average, but we knew how to work very hard."

THEIR FIRST YEAR of competition, the group was unable to participate in the local science fair, which had yet to be integrated. They traveled to Fort Valley, Ga., instead.

"Something funny happened," Hobbs said. "We won."

The group, however, was too young to participate in the International Science Fair. Beard and others raised the money for the boys to attend anyway, just for the experience.

By their senior year, the local fair had been integrated and the Rocket Club won there, too. They competed at the International Fair that year and won an award from the U.S. Patent Office for the most innovative project in biology.

"People had the perception that kids from these neighborhoods just weren't smart," Hobbs said. "It wasn't true. What they lacked were opportunities."

Johnson went on to attend Morehouse College. He's now a minister, serving as an elder of the 3,000-member Strong Hold Christian Church in Lithonia, Ga.

Johnny Roberts, a club member living in Waynesboro, Ga., joined the military after high school. He learned to speak Arabic and French and traveled through Africa as an interpreter for then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Richmond County Superior Court Judge Carl Brown was also a member of the Rocket Club.

So was Larry Palmer, who went on to become U.S. Ambassador to Honduras. He now heads the Inter-American Foundation in Washington, D.C., which funds development in Latin American countries and the Caribbean.

Jonas Isaac studied at Emory University alongside Palmer. He went on to work in the vertical assembly building at Kennedy Space Center, a building he toured on the Rocket Club field trip years earlier. He now works as a civilian senior Army intelligence analyst at Fort Gordon.

"It's incredible looking back," he said. "The effort Mrs. Beard put out as a teacher is what made a difference with the debutantes and the Rocket Club. She was just an inspiring person. It was a perfect class and a perfect teacher coming together at the perfect time."

A few Rocket Club members -- Pamela Weston, Joe Carr and Freddie Welcher -- left Josey and the club to transfer to Academy of Richmond County the first year school choice was available.

"It was difficult, but integration took precedence," said Welcher, who teaches computer science at Augusta Technical College. "It was worth the sacrifice. Beard was always clear that what we were doing was about more than science. It was more than rockets."

The club dissolved a few years after most of its founders graduated in 1966. At any given time, it had up to 15 members, Millender said, and probably no more than 25 alumni.

Beard, in the meantime, grew the debutante club, which continues to operate in Augusta.

She is 88 and lives in Atlanta with one of her four children. She retired in 1983 after 41 years of teaching.

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