



**Vern Sinclair—Counselor at Southeast during the 1960s and early 1970s.**

Mr. Sinclair celebrated his 90th birthday with a celebration held at Farview Restoration Branch in Independence on June 24, 2012.

**Southeast Memories**

“I remember arriving at school about an hour early one day in the late 1960s. There was lots of noise, and students were getting out of control. I called the police, and they herded the black students into the auditorium. This was during the days of racial unrest and white flight. Those kids were just acting out what they saw their parents and other adults doing, but it had a permanent impact on Southeast. The school changed. From then on, we had unrest at the school just like in the community.”

The racial problems in the late 1960s changed everything. White flight resulted in \$60,000 houses being sold for \$20,000. Neighborhoods declined. If a student was having problems at school, I would have to visit the parents at home. I hated to go into some areas. Sometimes I would get a cop to go with me. Some of the black students started manipulating the system. They claimed that things were “not fair.” We were doing all we could, but some students would not even participate. It was a difficult time.

I remember Mr. McMillan. He was a fine principal; he was always fair. Ben Markley’s music program had to compete against Southwest. Southwest had better musicians; some of the Southwest parents were in the

symphony. Rose McMaster, Cecil Patterson, and Jess Cross were at Southeast while I was there.

### **The Early Years and Love of Music**

I grew up in Independence and attended William Jewell College for one year. We have lived in the same house in Independence since the 1950s. I built the house. We lived in the basement until I finished the upstairs when I was in school.

William Jewell did not have a band. I had played the french horn in high school and in summer bands, and I wanted to continue with music. So, I packed my suitcase and my horn and went to KU in Lawrence. I washed dishes at one of the fraternity houses in the morning in exchange for breakfast. I remember that I was washing dishes when we got the news about Pearl Harbor.

During the war, I played in the Coast Guard Band, and we traveled to 42 countries playing for service members. Artie Shaw was the head of the war band. Segregation was still an issue back then. I remember that there was only one hotel that would let the band stay since we had two black band members.

After the war, I attended Washington University in St. Louis on the GI Bill. I received my music degree from Michigan in 1951. I taught in Iowa a couple of years, and I started with the Kansas City School District in 1953 teaching band and orchestra at Central. The music program was not well funded. The dollars we should have received went to the physical education department.

When musical instruments were stolen from the school, Les Milgram provided replacement instruments and uniforms. (Les Milgram was the son of the grocery store owner and a big community booster. I played in his band.) After a few years of frustration at the lack of support for the music program, I decided to change my career path. I went back to school and earned a degree in counseling and administration from the University of Central Missouri at Warrensburg.

### **Counseling Career**

I began my school counseling career at Nowlin Junior High on Hardy in Independence. After several years at Nowlin, I moved to Leeds Dunbar, a

colored school, for a couple of years before I started at Southeast. After Southeast, I returned to Nowlin to complete my counseling career. I retired in 1984.

As a school counselor, it was my job to talk with girls about getting pregnant. I warned them that behavior like that could result in a life of poverty. We had those conversations whenever the principal asked me to.

### **Family Life**

My wife and I have four daughters. When they were little, we had a 16' Shasta camping trailer. We always took a month-long vacation in the summer. I also worked as a carpenter during my free time; my father was also a carpenter. I played in the orchestra at Starlight Theater in the summer. I have played the french horn for over 70 years. I started playing with the Independence Symphony when I was 16.