

Blackmon, Alma (Montgomery) (1921–2009)

LELA GOODING

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Alma Montgomery Blackmon was an outstanding musician and educator who taught school for 42 years, including 12 at Oakwood College (now a university). Before coming to Oakwood, she was already an accomplished, renowned music teacher, choral director, and concert pianist, and her talents had been drafted for the SDA world church.¹

Alma was born in Washington, D.C., on July 25, 1921, the second child of James Montgomery and Martha Good Montgomery.² Her only sibling, Margaret Montgomery (1919--1996), was also a gifted musician and followed a career of teaching piano and voice at the high school level in Washington, D.C.³ James and Martha were both teachers, but when their children came along, Martha became a stay-at-home mom.⁴ By age five Alma was reading music and playing the piano, although she did not receive her first formal piano lesson until after she turned six.⁵ She was an accomplished musician by the time she matriculated at the District of Columbia Teachers College (now a part of the University of the District of Columbia) for a Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education with a minor in English. Later she earned a Master of Arts.⁶ After college she began her teaching career at Payne Elementary School.⁷ She had been a church organist since the age of ten, serving at the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington, D.C., all through her school years and also in the Ephesus church (now Dupont Park) when her parents transferred their membership there.⁸ She totally involved herself in music ministry—singing in the choir, playing the organ, and finally becoming the director of the Dupont Park Choir.⁹ Under her direction the choir excelled and attracted the attention of prominent musicians in the D.C., area. This provided opportunities for performances outside the church in highly respected musical venues, as well as prestigious choral conducting appointments for Alma.¹⁰



Alma Montgomery Blackmon

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

In 1948 two catastrophic events indelibly affected Alma's worldview. In March her mother died of breast cancer, and a few months later she herself was diagnosed with cancer of the womb. At her dear mother's deathbed she realized that she was not ready to respond unreservedly to her mother's plea: "Meet me in the earth made new."¹¹ And as she faced the terrifying prospect of her own death from cancer, she realized how tenuous life is. She was 27 years old. More than 50 years later Alma wrote her autobiography and chose to begin it with these two events, fervently grateful for her faith growth and the way God had unerringly led her through the succeeding triumphs and disasters of her life, fulfilling His promise that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28, KJV).

During the first cancer ordeal (she had another in 1972), she accepted the marriage proposal of Henry Blackmon (1923–2004), a fellow voice student, and they were married on January 2, 1949.¹² When his sister Bernice died, Henry and Alma adopted her five-year-old daughter Brenda. Unfortunately, their marriage ended with Henry spending most of his time in Europe, climbing high on the ladder of fame as a "renowned American baritone, choir director, and voice teacher."¹³ Alma undertook the responsibilities of single parenthood, always aware that Brenda was her greatest blessing and responsibility.¹⁴

Careful to utilize each day as a precious gift, Alma sought out the best teachers for voice and piano and learned her conducting techniques from 12 years of close observation as accompanist and assistant conductor to a brilliant director of the Washington Community Chorus.¹⁵ Her musical expertise—as vocal soloist, pianist, choral director, and music teacher—opened doors to opportunities to perform in elite places and to create friendships with celebrities in and outside the music community, including distinguished artists who visited D.C. for special events.

In the District of Columbia Alma taught kindergarteners and elementary school children in the public schools; and taught early childhood education and English to undergraduate students at Howard University; graduate students at the University of the District of Columbia and Bowie State College in Maryland; and to teachers in the in-service programs of the public schools. In 1962 she was appointed supervisor of kindergarten education in the Department of Elementary Education for the District of Columbia.¹⁶ When Alma's cancer returned ruthlessly in 1972, requiring drastic, complex surgery and a three-month stay in the hospital, her sick leave balance was inadequate to keep her on the school system's payroll. But overwhelming support from friends, colleagues, and students put her back on the payroll before she left the hospital, and enabled her to say that instead of losing, they had gained financially during her hospitalization.¹⁷ The next year Blackmon, at 52, was able to retire on disability and move to Oakwood.

Still recuperating, she lived with pain and discomfort each day of her life, though it never showed in her face or demeanor. The members of her choir knew that there was a possibility of an incident that could cause her to leave the performance stage, and were told how to respond without causing one raised eyebrow in the audience.¹⁸ Such an incident never occurred. In the English Department she taught freshman composition, and

in the Music Department she taught courses in music theory, humanities, voice, piano, and French, Italian, and German diction. For several years prior to her coming, the Aeolians had been in a state of neglect. During the next 12 years she restored and expanded its former glory, and it became “a greatly respected choral organization of international significance.”¹⁹ Under Blackmon’s baton, the Aeolians presented more than 230 concerts throughout 32 of the fifty states, the District of Columbia, Canada, the Socialist Republic of Romania, England, Scotland, Wales, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and St. Thomas and St. Croix of the Virgin Islands.²⁰

The two European tours were made under the auspices of the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation after Blackmon applied, and the Aeolians auditioned for membership in that prestigious organization. Both tours drew enthusiastic accolades from the foundation, and after the first (to Romania in 1981), Blackmon accepted an invitation from its president to travel to Moscow, Russia, as one of a group of 57 musicians and humanitarians, to dialogue with Russian government officials and explore suggestions for concert exchanges between nonprofessional groups of the Soviet Union and the United States.²¹

During her Oakwood years the General Conference drew Blackmon more intensely into service for the denomination. She was given a five-year appointment to the General Conference Music Committee and was asked to serve as associate choral conductor at the General Conference sessions in Dallas, Texas (1980), and New Orleans, Louisiana (1985). She was also assigned a three-year term on the Review and Herald Hymnal Committee, which worked to produce *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* in 1985.²² Three of the Negro spirituals in the hymnal were arranged by Alma. While at Oakwood, Blackmon also found time to write articles for the *Sabbath School Worker* and the *Adventist Review*, as well as taking leadership roles in cancer support and other humanitarian endeavors. During her last year, 1984 to 1985, she organized a blitzkrieg fund-raiser among faculty and student body and thereby donated \$10,000 for digging a well in Ethiopia where drought had caused severe famine.²³

Through the years Alma’s Aeolians were always welcome at her home for food, advice, and fellowship. Each year two Aeolians stayed at her home and reduced their college expenses while enjoying more communication with their mentor.²⁴ After their graduation Alma kept in touch with her beloved Aeolians, the hundreds whose lives had been indelibly touched by her. Those who remained in the Huntsville community after graduation were invited to sing with the Aeolians on various occasions, and from her seventieth birthday, when former Aeolians planned a beautiful weekend of music and oral tributes, Blackmon began a tradition of reunion with her Alumni Aeolians every two years, sometimes including a gala concert.²⁵ Alma’s Aeolians Alumni also instituted an Alma Montgomery Blackmon scholarship for music students at Oakwood.²⁶

During its spring 1988 graduation Andrews University bestowed an honorary Doctor of Music on Blackmon for her musical contributions to the world church of Seventh-day Adventists.²⁷ Two years later Atlantic Union College awarded her an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, in recognition of her international service through the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation, especially during the cold war period.²⁸

After retiring from Oakwood, Blackmon moved to Memphis, Tennessee, with her beloved daughter Brenda and family. Without a pause, she continued in music ministry and education, serving as minister of music at the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Memphis, and establishing an impressive nursery school for her grandchildren.²⁹ In 1989 she accepted the invitation of one of her former Aeolians, Wintley Phipps (1955–), to spend one month in Australia as his minister of music while he conducted evangelistic meetings for the Greater Sydney Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. When her family moved to Atlanta, she served for eight years as minister of music at the Berean SDA Church. For the last seven years of her life, she served as pianist for Buckhead Baptist Church. She also directed the a cappella choir Joyful Sound at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit and contributed to the music program of Buckhead Community Fellowship, a Seventh-day Adventist ministry where her family worshipped.³⁰ In Atlanta she was honored with Lifetime Achievement awards from the United Christian Artists Association and the Adventist Musicians Guild.³¹

Alma Blackmon was a remarkable woman, with talents fully dedicated to God and fully used in joyful service. The iron will to live and serve, bathed in God's grace, and her unremitting faith, secured her survival through heartaches and incredible hardships. Cancer returned again, and she passed quietly to her rest on June 10, 2009.³²

At Oakwood Blackmon left a legacy that continues vibrant to the present time. She will always be remembered as a renowned choir director who brought worldwide acclaim to the Aeolians.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Roy E. Malcolm, ed., *The Aeolians: Directors Recall Precious Memories* (Huntsville, Alabama: Oakwood College Publishing Association, 1999), 60.
2. Alma Montgomery Blackmon, *This Is My Story* (Huntsville, Alabama: Oakwood College Publishing Association, 2000), ix.

3. Ibid. 45.
4. Malcolm. 59. See also Blackmon, ix.
5. Malcolm. 59. See also Blackmon, 2.
6. Blackmon, 53.
7. Ibid., viii, 3.
8. Malcolm, 59.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 60.
11. Blackmon, x.
12. Ibid., 21.
13. "Henry Blackmon Memorial Concert (31 May 2014)," *The Hague Online: News and Events for the International Community*, May 14, 2014, accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.thehagueonline.com/top-events/2014/05/14/henry-blackmon-memorial-concert-31-may-2014>.
14. Blackmon, 59, 63.
15. Ibid., 1, 36, 37. See also Malcolm, 59.
16. Malcolm, 59.
17. Blackmon, 109.
18. Lela Gooding, personal knowledge as a colleague of Alma Montgomery Blackmon.
19. Malcolm, 60.
20. Ibid. See also Blackmon, 139, 140.
21. Malcolm, 60. See also Blackmon, 128.
22. See Blackmon, 148. See also Malcolm, 60.

23. Malcolm, 60, 61.

24. Blackmon, 148-152.

25. Ibid., 169.

26. Ibid., 171.

27. Ibid., 158. See also Malcolm, 61.

28. Blackmon, 171. See also Malcolm, 61.

29. Blackmon, 152.

30. "Alma Blackmon obituary," C. T. Richards Chapel, June 15, 2009, Oakwood University Archives.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

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