



Nellie Brown Thornton

July 31, 1934 - January 19, 2025

Nellie Mae Brown was born on July 31, 1934 to Annie Bell Brown, the daughter of Ollie Brown and Fed Brown of Jackson, Georgia. Fed Brown was a bootlegger under the employ of the county sheriff and as legend has it, a bit of an underground railroad conductor. More on that story later. Her father, Willie James Crawford, was a young sharecropper by day and bootlegger by night from Indian Springs, Georgia. The next 90 years for Nellie were filled with both tragedy and adventure.

Tragedy struck Nellie through social injustice at the age of eight when her mother was taken away and sentenced to life in prison while pregnant with her youngest child. Although that sentence was commuted eight years later, it left Nellie without a mother during her most formative years. Even post prison, her mother continued to be absent from the community and Nellie's life for a number of years. This kind of trauma continues to survive for generations.

Nellie was left to be raised by her grandparents and other extended family. As the oldest child, she felt the heavy burden of protecting and caring for her three younger siblings without the protective apron of a mother. Growing up "in town" instead of "in the country," Nellie often worked as a domestic at a very young age, being forced to grow up way too fast.

Nellie watched her grandmother Ollie pack huge sacks of food for her

grandfather Fed as he disappeared into the night for weeks at a time. She later came to understand that her grandfather was a guide who escorted black men north, hobbing on freight trains to avoid eminent lynching. This was the birth of Nellie's interest in social activism.

Although opportunities were limited, Nellie loved sports, especially basketball. This is a gift that she ultimately passed to her children and grandchildren. She was blessed with an opportunity to play for a brief time while at the colored high school in Jackson, Georgia. This opportunity was interrupted as Nellie became a single mother at age fifteen.

In the mid-1950s, Nellie met Willie Morris Thornton, a young Korean War veteran from Locust Grove, Georgia. Willie Morris was a highly intelligent and industrious young man who suffered from what we now know to be post-traumatic stress syndrome from the horrendous atrocities he experienced during the Korean War. They went on to marry in 1956 and began their lives back in Locust Grove, Georgia as what we now call a "blended family."

In 1961, Nellie and Willie Morris became the first young black family of their generation to build a new home in the town of Locust Grove, just a "stone's throw" from Shoal Creek Baptist Church where Willie Morris' grandfather, Robert "Bob" Colvin, was one of the early leaders in the late 1800's. Nellie and Willie Morris went on to become pillars of both the Shoal Creek Baptist Church and the community at large.

Nellie's love for sports and her children led her to become a youth baseball organizer and manager. This was unheard of for a woman in the late 1960s. She was an avid reader who believed that education was a virtue. Nellie also loved flower gardening and baking. Cakes were her specialty: Chocolate, German Chocolate, Caramel, Pineapple, Coconut and Red Velvet. Her cooking was so renowned, that Deacon Willie Morris would end up "running

the preachers off” when the Thorntons hosted the Pastor for dinner on Second Sundays because they were eating too much food! Nellie even cooked for visiting former pastor Rev. Martin Luther King Sr.

Nellie loved music and loved to dance. She had a core group of friends and was loyal to a fault. Nellie was a bit of a fashionista who was always conscious of her image and appearance. Some might call her “proper.”

Like many black women of her generation, she was always a working mom. She started as a domestic, worked as a school cafeteria cook and then a factory worker. Her young children would be so excited when she brought home used clothing from the “white folks” house. Nellie was most proud of her work as a special education assistant for the Henry County Board of Education in the late 1970’s. One of her greatest accomplishments was organizing and working on the Special Olympics for the special needs children of Henry County.

In the 1980’s Nellie moved to Atlanta to be with her ailing mother. Blessed with the gift of gab, she never met a stranger. Nellie became a greeter at one of Kroger’s Citi Center concept stores in the West End, where she was adored. In 1987, Nellie participated in Rev Hosea Williams’ Civil Rights March in Forsyth County Georgia, protesting the county’s status as a “sundown county,” no black people allowed after dark. This legacy of activism and standing up for the underdog continues to live on in her children. Nellie later spent many years traveling with her friend Herman Pittman. She certainly had a zest for life.

She spent the final years of her life living with her daughter Wander before succumbing to dementia and moving to a nursing home in 2020. As always, Nellie was the “Queen of the Ball” at the Medical Management Health &

Rehab nursing home in Macon, GA. She died peacefully in her sleep on Sunday morning, January 19th, 2025.

Nellie was preceded in death by her former husband Deacon Willie Morris Thornton Sr, her son Harry "Skeet" Thornton, her grandson Ryan Thornton, her brothers Andre Brooks & John Marvin Brooks and her sister Christine McElhaney Folds. She is survived by her children Delores Thornton Baxter, Dr. W M "Billy" Thornton Jr (Meril), Johnny Thornton (Angela), Wander Thornton, foster daughter Pauline Ponder Gaston and her sister Catherine Brooks Douglas. She is also survived by her grandchildren Starr Baxter, Andrea Thornton Bolden (Earl), Marcus Thornton, Isaiah Thornton and great grandchild Jayden Thornton.

Donations In Lieu of Flowers

Special Olympics Georgia

Online: <https://support.specialolympics.org/a/georgia>

By Check:

Special Olympics Georgia

6046 Financial Drive

Norcross, GA 30071

OR

Johnny D. Thornton & Angela Boyce Thornton Endowed Scholarship

North Carolina Central University

Online: <https://www.nccu.edu/institutional-advancement/giving-online>

By Check:

NCCU Foundation Inc.

PO Box 19363

Durham, NC 27707

MEMO: The Johnny D. Thornton & Angela Boyce Thornton Endowed
Scholarship

Celebration of Life Services for Nellie Thornton will be held on Saturday,
January 25, 2025 at 11AM. These services will be recorded and streamed live.
If the event is interrupted at any time due to technical issues, the entire event
will be uploaded and available to view later in the day. Please copy and paste
the link to share, or simply click on the link to view the event.

<https://vimeo.com/event/4869772>

Previous Events

Viewing

JAN **24**. 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

W.D. Lemon & Sons Funeral Home - McDonough Chapel
300 Griffin Street
McDonough, GA 30253
(770) 957-4337
info@wdlemonfuneralhome.com

Service

JAN **25**. 11:00 AM (ET)

Shoal Creek Baptist Church
99 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
Locust Grove, GA 30248

Interment

JAN **25** (ET)

Shoal Creek Baptist Church
99 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
Locust Grove, GA 30248

Tribute Wall



“ W.D. Lemon & Sons Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Nellie Brown Thornton



W.D. Lemon & Sons Funeral Home - January 24, 2025 at 03:09 PM

CJ

“ Chris J. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Nellie Brown Thornton.

Chris J. - January 24, 2025 at 09:43 AM

CJ

“ Chris J. purchased the Sentiments of Serenity Spray for the family of Nellie Brown Thornton.



Chris J. - January 24, 2025 at 09:43 AM

JE

“ Jeff Sutton and Amy Evers purchased the Magnificent Life Spray for the family of Nellie Brown Thornton.



Jeff Sutton and Amy Evers - January 24, 2025 at 08:26 AM

LA

“ *Lucy and Raymond Allen purchased the Beautiful Dreams for the family of Nellie Brown Thornton.*



Lucy and Raymond Allen - January 24, 2025 at 08:11 AM

LA

“ *Lucy and Raymond Allen planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Nellie Brown Thornton.*

Lucy and Raymond Allen - January 24, 2025 at 08:11 AM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Nellie Brown Thornton.*



January 23, 2025 at 10:27 AM

PV

“ *I am sending our heartfelt condolences, thoughts and prayers to the Brown and Thornton families during this difficult time. I didn't know Mrs. Nellie personally, but I was a classmate of Harry's, West Side High, C/O '68. May God's comfort, strength and love carry you all through this new norm of life 🙏🙏🙏*



Patricia Mckibben Varner - January 22, 2025 at 04:02 PM

LM

“ *Lisa Mckibben lit a candle in memory of Nellie Brown Thornton*



Lisa Mckibben - January 22, 2025 at 03:10 PM

DT

“ *I am a cousin of Billy, Delores, Johnny and Wander. I was saddened to learn of my Aunt Nellie's passing. Know that God is there during this time and He will see you through. Love you.*

Debberin Thornton Tunsil

Debberin Tunsil - January 22, 2025 at 01:07 PM

DI

“ *Deborah Inniss lit a candle in memory of Nellie Brown Thornton*



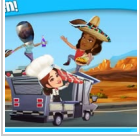
Deborah Inniss - January 22, 2025 at 01:06 PM



“ *Beautiful Heart Bouquet was purchased for the family of Nellie Brown Thornton.*



January 21, 2025 at 01:18 PM



“ *Pauline Gaston lit a candle in memory of
Nellie Brown Thornton* ”



Pauline Gaston - January 21, 2025 at 04:49 AM