

Biography of Mrs. Gertrude E. Ayer

Mrs. Gertrude E. Ayer, the first Negro woman to receive a principalship in the city's schools, attributes to her mother the major influence in shaping her development as an individual who would hold a public position. "I credit my mother," she told me, "with having imparted to me her own lack of inhibitions so far as facing any obstacles as a Negro."

It is easy to distinguish in this woman's appearance all the results of this influence. Here is a very vigorous woman, ample-bodied and strong, with a large capacity for laughter and enjoyment. This is evident in her hearty, strong voice and in the complete ease with which she greets visitors in her office at P.S. 24, located at 128th Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues.

Her mother, an English woman, was born on the Isle of Wight. Elizabeth W. Johnson fell in love and married Dr. P. A. Johnson, distinguished as the third colored physician in Harlem, and this happy union ushered in the life of Gertrude E. Johnson, later to become the Mrs. Gertrude E. Ayer of this story. Of Dr. Johnson Mrs. Ayer had this to say. "He encouraged me to think and to truthfully face all issues. He was a very brilliant man."

Gertrude E. Johnson was born in New York City on October 13th, 1884. There ~~is~~^{was} nothing spectacular about her early life, except that she fortunately was able to secure

a better education than the average child born in Harlem.

Her education was acquired at P.S. 48, Wadleigh High School, the New York Training School for Teachers, with her college work scattered through such seats of learning as Columbia University, the College of the City of New York, and New York University.

Upon the completion of her schooling she was appointed as a teacher at P.S. 11 in Manhattan. She remained in this post until 1911 when she married Cornelius McDougald, a lawyer. She resigned as a teacher and completely devoted herself to a domestic life.

Very soon this energetic woman was expanding her interests once more. She completed a survey, which was published by the Y.W.C.A. and Consumers League, entitled "A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker." In 1917 she headed the women's department in a United States employment service. She also served for a time as the industrial secretary of the New York Urban League. She combined her teaching experience and her employment placement experience, and in 1918 she undertook vocational guidance in the Henry Street Settlement.

In 1919 she was in charge of educational guidance for girls in P.S. 119. For the next five years she carried on similar work in Public Schools 89, 5 and 119.

She took the competitive examination for assistant principals, and in 1924 was appointed to serve in such a capacity at P.S. 89. In 1927 she was transferred to P.S. 90 where she remained until 1935, at which time she was appointed as assistant to the principal in charge of P.S. 24.

On February 1st, 1936 she became the principal of P.S. 24, the first Negro woman to ever attain this office.

Of P.S. 24 Mrs. Ayer said: "This school is one of the official activity schools in the experiment which is being made in an attempt to improve methods in teaching. 70 schools are engaged in this experiment. P.S. 24 is the only school in Harlem which is in the experiment group. It is also one of the 8 schools which is being evaluated for results. The experiment will be concluded in September 1940.

"My reason for being in the experiment is that the informalized methods used are effective in lessening behaviour disorders because of the amount of initiative, judgment and participation that the children have to use in their work. The children thrive on less formal contact between teacher and pupil. We have had a great many problem behaviour cases, and we believe that this method has been a very large factor in our successful handling of them. The social case work method is used a great deal in conjunction with this progressive classroom method."

In spite of a very active public life Mrs. Ayer has successfully reared two children. Her son, Cornelius McDougald, Jr. is a graduate of Fordham Law School and Lincoln University. Her daughter, Elizabeth McDougald, is a graduate of Hunter College and took her Master's Degree at Columbia University. She is at present engaged in social service work with the Board of Child Welfare.

Mrs. Ayer divorced her first husband, and ~~later~~ ^{in 1928} she married Vernon Ayer, a physician.

Mrs. Ayer's educational and sociological work gives her a prominent role in the life and activities of the Negro people of New York. It is not too much to say that she is one of the outstanding women of the city.

Experimental School -
Public School #24

While there is ~~nowhere~~ system of education in New York which might be ~~ex~~ termed "Negro", the experimental work being carried out at P.S. 24 ~~now~~ promises to evolve a system which will come as close to such a ~~one~~ ^{Method} as is possible in this democracy.

~~From the American Education Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1934, p. 10. The name of the school is P.S. 24, located at 128 St + Madison Ave.~~
P.S. 24 is one of the nine experimental schools set up by the Board of Education in 1934 for the purpose of instituting a more scientific, and at the same, more democratic ^{method} of public school training. If successful, this system is to be placed in schools throughout the city. The experiment is still underway, having gone through six of the seven years allotted to it. Under the guidance of Miss Gertrude Ayers, P.S. 24 represents that phase of the experiment carried out among the Negro children of the city. And because this method takes into consideration ~~the~~ environmental factors and their effects upon the child, psychological and otherwise, P.S. 24 comes ^{closer} to grips with problems encountered by the pupil as a "negro" than has before been possible. Miss Ayers explains that her school approaches the child as a creative individual, who, if given an opportunity, will bring a high degree of inventiveness to the solution of his own problems. This inventiveness is stressed at P.S. 24., where the pupils are introduced to democratic procedures and are allowed to participate in the operation of the school itself. Mrs Ayers believes her pupils, as Negroes, possess a tendency towards artistic expression and originality which makes them especially good material for such an experiment. . Students are allowed to take part in school discipline. A school paper is published where in the pupils, all of elementary grades, take part in all phases of newspaper work, from ~~the~~ reporting

to the actual printing. Attended ~~principally~~ ^{MONK} by underprivileged pupils, the school is recognized as a home substitute for many and every effort is made to make that substitute as ~~as~~ ^{complete} as possible. ~~Psychologists~~ ^{Guidance Bureau} are provided to overcome personality problems brought on by the environment. A toy library has been established where the child may borrow toys that catch his fancy and return them afterwards. To maintain the upkeep of this library, and at the same time to provide an outlet for those pupils who evince artistic talent, a work shop is operated where the all of the repairs, and even new toys are made by pupils. A puppetry work shop is operated by the pupils who construct their own puppets, design their costumes and write their own plays as well. Miss Ayers explains that through encouraging arts and craft work the school has been able to greatly reduce raids by pupils upon the Five and Ten Cents stores. ^{G. P. Herlein} At the same time, she states, that during the five years that the experiment has been in progress there has been a noticeable change in the attitude of pupils toward teachers and principal. Today, Mrs. Ayers states, the principal problem encountered at P.S. 24 is ~~that~~ no longer fighting, as was once true, but singing in the halls. The school, she states, should be looked upon as the primary social agency whose duty is to prepare the child to avoid clashes with other social agencies during his growth.

At the World Fair P.S. 24 received praise for its work and was given space in the photo mural and in a moving picture, while Miss Ayers, its principal, was awarded a plaque for her work in experimental education.