



By Kyle Poplin

KYLE POPLIN | ANN ARBOR PEOPLE

COLUMN: An adopted son who learned from his mother not to rest on his laurels

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Henry Johnson's mother knew what she was doing.

She sent Henry off to school every day wearing a tie, even though the school had no dress code. Hattie Mae Johnson just wanted to make sure her child went to school ready to learn.

And when we say "every day," that's what we mean. Henry never missed a day of school from kindergarten through high school. Even when he had the mumps.

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Henry's mother taught math at his school, and everyone called her "The Chief," though never to her face. "There was no reason for me ever to be absent. ... Nobody messed with my mother," Henry says without a trace of a smile on his face.

He was raised to be special, and it worked.

He went from tiny Elberton, Ga. -- the self-proclaimed "Granite Capital of the World," a corner of Georgia where most young men end up working at a quarry or a farm -- to vice president at the University of Michigan.

All the while, and especially today, Henry has found time to volunteer. "The world does not revolve around you," the 74-year-old explains.

He was on the Ann Arbor school board for six years, was the local United Way board chairman twice and is now chairperson of the Presbyterian Villages of Michigan Board of Directors and its Strategic Planning Committee. The list of his volunteer accomplishments is so long that he was the 2010 Michigan Senior Citizen of the Year for Leadership, sponsored by the Michigan Commission and Office of Services to the Aging and Consumers Energy.

All that looks great on his resume. What doesn't show up is the fact that every Thursday night, Henry rolls his trash can along with his neighbor's out to the curb for pickup the next morning. After the trash man comes, he rolls them all back in. Not because anyone asked him to, but because that's how he was raised, to be a good neighbor.

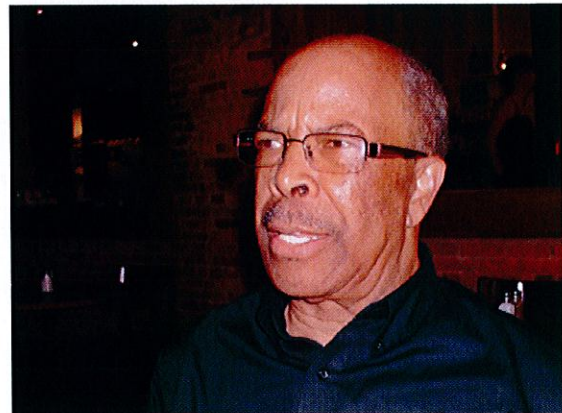
The story gets even more interesting when you realize that "The Chief," aka Hattie Mae Johnson, is not Henry's biological mother. His birth mother died soon after Henry and his twin sister, Harriett, were born in Atlanta. Henry's father was a chauffeur and butler and already had seven children, so Henry and Harriett were placed in foster care. They were adopted by the Johnsons in Elberton when they were 2.

Henry and Harriett's biological family never knew where the twins ended up, until Harriett did some research and connected everyone in 1994. The twins met everyone when they attended a 300-person family reunion in Atlanta. For the first time in his life, Henry saw people that looked just like him. Noticing the back of a guy's head across a hotel lobby, Henry told his wife, Billie, "That's got to be one of my brothers." It was.

Henry later learned that at all the family's Thanksgiving celebrations and reunions, his biological father would tell everyone in attendance to "pray for the twins, wherever they are."

Turns out, Henry was doing fine. He always knew he was going to go to college - his mother and all her brothers and sisters did - and his uncles made sure he became a "Morehouse Man" by attending that proud college in Atlanta. He spread his wings there, becoming one of only two freshmen to make the college's prestigious glee club and seeing much of the United States traveling with the group. The most important thing he learned at Morehouse? That anything is possible.

For example, as vice president for student affairs at U-M for two decades, Johnson faced many challenges. None of them especially scared



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him: "I was from Morehouse," he says. "I could do anything I set my mind to do."

One accomplishment, he said, was helping change the Michigan Union in 1972 from a place where "you could shoot a cannon down the halls and not hit a student" into a campus hotspot. He also helped start the William Monroe Trotter Multicultural Center in 1971, and launched an ombudsman program so that students could be heard.

Henry did all kinds of things he's proud of, from his days as a mental health professional to his time in the halls of academia. But he doesn't really dwell on his past accomplishments. There are too many things out there that need doing today, from heading up charitable organizations to simply being a good neighbor.

His mother would be pleased. And that's saying something.

Kyle Poplin is publisher of [The Ann magazine](#), which is inserted monthly in various print editions of AnnArbor.com. He's also searching, through this column, for the most interesting person in Ann Arbor. If you have anyone in mind, email your idea to theannmag@gmail.com.

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