



# A treasured elder...

## Thelma Raiford Johnson

*A career businesswoman who still lives life her way*



**T**helma Johnson is meticulously dressed and coiffed and seated at the piano in the spacious dining room at Catalina Health Care Center in Daytona Beach. Nat King Cole's "Sweet Lorraine" echoes gently through the halls and it's Johnson who's playing it flawlessly from memory. At age 93, she has many memories from a life lived independently — one that sometimes ran contrary to what society's expectations at the time were for young black women in the south. Her smile and easy friendliness immediately puts one at ease. Her elegant manner bespeaks her educated upbringing.

### Georgia roots

Johnson was born the oldest of three children in Dermont, Arkansas to parents who both were college graduates. When Johnson was only three months old, her family returned to their native Georgia where her father was a high school principal, university faculty member and Baptist minister in several cities near and outside Atlanta. Her mother taught school and supplemented the family's income by giving piano lessons and selling cosmetics. "When I was a little girl, I met Madam C.J. Walker herself when she trained my mother," Johnson said of the legendary black entrepreneur and philanthropist. Walker and daughter A'Lelia traveled the south for years shortly after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and set up thousands of black women in their own beautician businesses that also sold her company's scalp- and hair-care products. Aside from teaching, nursing and domestic work, black women had few options for earning a living independent of men in the Jim Crow days of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Walker's message to black women was of equality, economic self-empowerment, independence and social and civic influence, something Johnson herself would embody for the rest of her life.

### Tuskegee Institute

During the summers, teenager Johnson accompanied her father to Tuskegee Institute, where he taught as a visiting



### Always Elegant:

*Johnson worked hard all her life but always enjoyed the good life, be it in her backyard patio or while traveling. Today, she still enjoys life and regularly sneaks outside to smoke cigarettes with "the younger men." "I've always believed I can achieve what I want to achieve, and I have."*



*Johnson's independent spirit was evident at an early age. "When I was a teenager I visited a courthouse in Washington, Georgia and looked for a water fountain. There were two — one for 'white' and one for 'colored.' I was drinking from the 'white' fountain when a policeman came up to me and told me I couldn't do that. I just laughed and told him I wanted to find out what 'white' water tastes like!"*



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professor. There she met many members of the TI faculty, including agricultural chemist/botanist George Washington Carver, who was already renowned. "He had a high-pitched voice and on his shelf were dozens and dozens of little bags of soil that farmers from all over the south would send him to analyze," Johnson recalled. "They'd put a little cash in on top so he'd look at it right away."

After graduating from high school, Johnson attended Tuskegee Institute as an undergraduate while working part-time in the school's laundry. She was very popular on campus and knew several of the famed Tuskegee Airmen personally. As a member of the school's 150-member choir, in 1933, she traveled to New York City for a six-week, three-performances-a-day engagement at the newly-opened Radio City Music Hall. Johnson never graduated from Tuskegee Institute, but working in her mother's hair-care business, and later her own, had meant good money — much more than her parents were making as educators.

Johnson operated beauty salons in Miami

and Atlanta before finally settling in Ocala. "I was visiting and they practically begged me to stay because they had no beauty parlors," she recalled. Johnson bought a large tract of land and lived there 30 years. Her salon became a town social center and Johnson herself became very influential in the local business community. When her parents eventually retired, they moved to Ocala to live with her until their deaths.

## Love comes

As a spirited — too often, rebellious — teenager, Johnson had married and divorced twice before age 21. She raised two boys to adulthood as a single mother going to school and working long hours in her salons. By middle age, she had become financially independent but had yet to remarry. Johnson moved for a short time to Washington, D.C., to study music at Howard University and work in her sister's beauty salon.

One year, both attended the National Beauty Culturists League convention at the nearby Roosevelt Hotel.

"The organizers had recruited single men from all over the area to serve as escorts for the single women who were coming in from all over the country," Johnson said. "The one who escorted my sister really had his eye on me." That would be Warren Johnson, a clerk at the Navy Annex who was also in his mid-fifties but had never married. "He said to me, 'You're going to be my wife,' and he courted me non-stop for three months." The couple was married at midnight in Virginia ("It was the darkest night I've ever seen in my life.") and spent 20 years together until his death. "He was a fine man and the best thing that ever happened to me."

## Looking back

Johnson moved into the spotless Catalina Health Care Center about three years ago. Today, only a son — himself in his late 70s and living in Fort Pierce — survives her. "I've had as rich and full a life as anybody could have."

FHCA honors Thelma Raiford Johnson and treasures her many contributions to our state and nation.

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