

The grandmother of Juneteenth still is walking for freedom

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FORT WORTH—Opal Lee, the “grandmother of Juneteenth” and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient—and “a little old lady in tennis shoes,” as she says she has been viewed—still is walking for freedom and unity at 98 years old, despite a recent hospitalization.

Lee chanced to meet *Baptist Standard* publisher and editor Eric Black in a Washington, D.C., airport this spring, where she had traveled for an engagement with her granddaughter, Dionne.

They just tell her where to go and she goes, she explained in the interview she gave to the *Baptist Standard* at her Annie Street home.

Lee confirmed the date of birth listed for her on the internet.

“I’m the oldest person alive,” she quipped, noting, “This is my 99th year.”

She said she was feeling good, so she expects the Lord will be good to her and allow her to make it to Oct. 7, her birthday.

Lee was hospitalized in late May while visiting Ohio for the 30th anniversary of Cincinnati’s National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the [Dallas Morning News reported](#). However, a news release from the nonprofit United Unlimited described her as “still unstoppable.”

Would not have survived without God

Lee grew up the granddaughter of a Baptist pastor with 19 kids, she said. When her parents wed, her mother began attending the Methodist (AME)

church with Lee's dad, and Lee grew up in that denomination.

She said she still attends Baker Chapel when "I'm in town, and I look forward to it." In fact, Lee pointed out, when she's out of town she's "a little miffed, because I want to be at my church."

Her faith has been important throughout her life, Lee said. "If I didn't have a God to depend on, ooo, some of the things that have happened, whew, you wouldn't have survived, you know?"

Lee recalled moving to the location where her house currently stands when she was around 9 or 10 years old. Her parents had moved around some, she said, but they ended up in a house on Annie Street in Fort Worth.

"But the people in the neighborhood didn't want us. They were white," she recalled.



Opal Lee explains a painting of her family tree displayed in her home.
(Photo by Eric Black)

Sensing trouble was afoot, Lee's parents sent Lee and her siblings to some friends' house several blocks away. Then they, too, "left under cover of

darkness, and the people tore the place apart and did despicable things,” she said.

“Our parents never discussed it with us,” Lee said. But they bought a house five blocks away on Terrell Avenue, where “there were whites on one side and Blacks on the other, and nobody seemed to mind.

“But in this area,” Lee said, “they were furious.”

That was on June 19, 1936, Juneteenth. She recalled how her mother had fixed up the house so nicely. Her dad came home from work with a gun that day, “and the police were here.”

The officers warned her father that if he fired a shot, they’d set the people—a crowd of around 500, Lee said—loose, “and let the mob have us.”

Lee emphasized again they’d never discussed that night with the children, “so we all drew our own conclusions.”

Winding road to completing her education

Lee’s parents had planned to send her to Wiley College in Marshall, but she got married instead.

However, after having four children of her own, Lee said she decided four kids to raise was plenty and “cut [her] losses,” meaning her (ex) husband was going to have to grow up on his own, she explained.

As a single parent, Lee enrolled in Wiley College to complete her degree in education—on her own dime this time—but her mother offered to help by keeping the kids.

She recalled working multiple jobs to save up for college, but then she

spent it on a TV to help keep the kids home where her mom could keep an eye on them more readily.

“I went to Wylie without a dime,” Lee noted, so she worked on campus during the week and came back to Fort Worth to work another job on weekends.

She finished in three-and-a-half years because, Lee said, she couldn’t do that any longer.

Lee taught third grade until she became a “visiting teacher” who would check on students who were absent and, like a social worker, help make sure they had what they needed, she explained.

Walking for freedom, 2.5 miles at a time

Some reports have said the mob destruction of her family home happening on Juneteenth is what spurred Lee’s push for Juneteenth to become a national holiday.

But Lee said: “I don’t know what spurred me. I just know that Juneteenth was extremely important to me ...

“I’m old as dirt,” Lee quipped.

“And so, I decided if I walked from Fort Worth to D.C.” to ask the president to make Juneteenth a national holiday, “maybe he would. And he did.”

The walk Opal Lee took began when she turned 90. She walked 2.5 miles in each city where she stopped between Texas and Washington D.C. The 2.5 miles represents the two and a half years it took for enslaved persons in Texas to receive word of their freedom after the Civil War ended.

Others provided aid and joined her at each location, solidifying her reputation as “the little old lady in tennis shoes.”

Despite all she has overcome and accomplished, Lee’s greatest achievement has been her children, she noted. She lost her youngest son to complications from injuries sustained during his time in the service, Lee said.

It was tragic to lose him, but all her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are her greatest blessings and achievement, Lee mused.

Waiting for a reply from the president

When asked about her views on current events in the United States, Lee mentioned she’d sent President Trump a letter. He’s yet to respond, but as she had been successful in reaching out to past presidents, she was hopeful she might get an opportunity to talk to him.

“I just don’t know where his views are coming from. I don’t understand,” Lee observed. She read her letter to President Trump in an interview available [here](#).

Her letter to President Trump pointed out that “leadership is more than policy, it’s example.” She asserts division is easy, but the “courageous” choice is unity.

“The road to freedom is long, but I’ve walked it my whole life,” Lee noted to the president, before asking him to name a time and place to walk, and she’d meet him there.

But Lee wasn’t too bothered about President Trump’s lack of response. “There’s so many other things that need to be done that I can’t concentrate on him,” she said.

‘We are our brother’s keeper’

Lee played a key role in securing the use of 13 acres of land on the Trinity River to be used for urban farming, [Opal’s Farm](#).

The farm manager, Greg Joel, provides produce for WIC and a food distribution center in the area and takes the rest to market, Lee explained.

Young people concerned about the future of the United States need to understand “we are our brother’s keeper,” Lee asserted.

“We are a people who have to look out for each other regardless of the color of our skin ... The Bible says so.”

So, Americans have a responsibility to help out wherever they can. “He’d want us to,” she noted, referring to God.

As for walking, Lee’s family and friends will be out walking again this Juneteenth, in [Opal’s Walk for Freedom](#), the annual 2.5 mile walk on June 19.

A portion of this year’s registration fee will go toward the construction of the National Juneteenth Museum. Participation in the walk can be in person or virtual.