

The Audrey Burgette Room Dedication Ceremony

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WILLIAM JEWELL COLLEGE

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Remembering the Trailblazing Legacy of Audrey June Burgette: A Pioneer in Education and Mother Extraordinaire

There are individuals whose impact transcends time, leaving an indelible mark on those fortunate enough to have known them. Audrey June (Stewart) Burgette, the first Black female graduate of William Jewell College, was one of these special people.

Audrey Burgette was born in Liberty, Missouri, on July 18, 1930. The circumstances of her childhood were a reflection of the times—Liberty was a racially segregated community still in the grips of Jim Crow laws. Her early educational years were also plagued by second-class treatment due to her race. This was before the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, so her schooling occurred under less than ideal conditions. She grew up in a supportive African American community and a loving family, which bolstered her to remain steadfast in her pursuit of academic excellence and personal growth. As a testament to this, she graduated as valedictorian of her class at Garrison School in Liberty.

Throughout her life, Audrey stood as a beacon of resilience and determination for overcoming numerous challenges. In her early 20s, she married John West Stapleton and welcomed two children, Carrie Eileen Stapleton and John West Stapleton, Jr., Esq. At the young age of 25, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was partially paralyzed by the disease. She battled back and regained her ability to walk, only to face the pain of divorce. Fortunately, she found love once again with Herbert Lee Burgette, a Korean War veteran from Kansas City. Together with Herbert, Audrey welcomed two more children into her loving embrace, the late Dr. Phillip Leroy Burgette, M.D., and Brigitte Burgette Bradley, Esq. Love was always present in her blended family's lives. Even though she and John were divorced, her second husband, Herbert, would sometimes connect with John Sr., a disabled war veteran, and offer to drive him to milestone events in Carrie and John Jr.'s lives, such as graduations and sporting events.

While raising four children under the age of 10, Audrey was unrelenting in her quest for education. She achieved her dream of attending and graduating from William Jewell College with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education in 1966. She later earned a Master of Arts in Education from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1972.

Audrey's dedication to education extended beyond her own academic pursuits. She was a revered elementary school teacher and counselor in the Kansas City Missouri School District for over 26 years. She touched the lives of countless children, instilling in them a passion for learning and a belief in their own potential. This commitment expanded beyond her professional life. Audrey became a foster parent to several young people during this time, giving them the same love and support she showed for her own students and children.

Audrey's commitment to excellence in education has also shaped the lives of her four children in profound ways, guiding them towards fulfilling their dreams and aspirations. They were inspired by her example to achieve great success in various fields, from law to medicine to public relations. Her legacy lives on through her three grandchildren, Carrie Nicole Randle, Langston Colin Taylor Burgette and Brandon Byron Hays; and one great-granddaughter, Nya Simone Payne. Carrie Nicole holds a master's degree and is pursuing a doctorate.

In the community, Audrey was an active member of the Kansas City Chapter of the National Association of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc., for which she was an officeholder and served on several committees. She was also a charter member of the Kansas City Chapter of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, which was established in 1979 by the Black Archives of Mid-America, Inc. Later in life, she added entrepreneur to her list of endeavors—she owned and operated a successful small business, the Stuart House of Maids.

Her relationship with Christ was a central force in her life with one ultimate goal: to give Jesus the glory. She was a member of Liberty's St. Luke A.M.E. Church, and later found her spiritual home at the Unity Church of New Life in Kansas City. She also wanted her children to put Jesus first. Every Christmas Eve, her family would celebrate by holding a birthday party for Jesus with a cake with one candle, singing Happy Birthday to him, making sure they knew the real meaning of Christmas. In 1986, the Urban League of Greater Kansas City's Black Family Recognition Committee honored the Burgette-Stapleton Family as a Model Black Family, recognizing them for their "sterling qualities of support, love, sharing, stability, nurturing, and the ability to overcome adversity."

Tragically, Audrey's life was cut short by cancer at the age of 62. Her passing left a void in the hearts of all who knew her, but her spirit of love, laughter, and dedication to education continues to inspire all who were touched by her presence. Her unwavering support for her family and community endures—a shining example of the transformative power of a life lived with purpose, perseverance, and passion.

As we remember Audrey June Burgette, we honor her trailblazing spirit, her commitment to education, and her profound impact on all of those whose lives she touched. May her memory continue to inspire future generations to embrace challenges with courage, to pursue their dreams with determination, and to always strive for excellence in all endeavors. Audrey June Burgette, a pioneer in education and a mother extraordinaire, will forever hold a special place in our hearts and in local history.

*"Remember to love all people, places, things, and mainly yourself.
With love you need nothing else, but without it you have nothing else."
– Audrey J. Burgette (from a letter to her daughter, 1983)*

**bio provided by the Stapleton/Burgette families*