

BOY FROM INNER-CITY RISES ABOVE THE FLAMES

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BY DOROTHY JENKINS FIELDS

Inner-city boy rises above the McDuffie riots

In May 1980 several Miami neighborhoods erupted as rioters burned buildings in response to the end of a trial. An all-white jury acquitted four white policemen of fatally beating black motorcyclist Arthur McDuffie, who had fled from arrest.

For three days, the air in Liberty City and Overtown was covered with thick smoke, 18 lives were lost and property damage totaled nearly \$100 million.

And yet, despite the tough times that prevailed in these neighborhoods for years after the McDuffie riots, our communities nevertheless produced extraordinary people such as Robert Battle.

During those days, Battle was a first-grader at Orchard Villa Elementary School in Liberty City. In April 2010, he was appointed the artistic director of the internationally-acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

According to the dance theater's website, the troupe has performed for an estimated 23 million people in 48 states and in 71 countries on six continents.

Growing up, Battle lived with his great-aunt and -uncle, Anna and Willie Horne.

With limited income, it was difficult for Robert's young single mother, Marie, to take care of him alone in Jacksonville. Seriously bow-legged, he needed braces for both legs. Seeing the circumstances, his aunt volunteered to raise him in Fernandina Beach. When she became ill, the Hornes' relocated to Liberty City with their daughter, Robert's second cousin, Dessie Williams. She became his mother, mentor and friend.

Now a retired English teacher, Dessie Horne Williams is known for her performances in community theater.

Beginning in the 1960s, Dessie Williams was active with a local drama group, the Afro-Americans. It was founded by her lifelong friend, then librarian Rychard S. Cook II, and included the late singer George Ross and the late musician Bobbie Kendrick. In addition to performing, this group disseminated black literature in the community and throughout the state.

While the Afro-Americans helped tell the story of the past achievements of their ancestors, there was rage and fear in the community.

Robert was partly shielded from that by family, friends and a religious environment that nurtured him and guided him to the arts. His aunt Bernice Edgecombe Telsaint helped provide private piano lessons from a music teacher, the late Juanita Hurd. Robert was an active member of Wactor Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church under the mentorship of the late Rev. Annie Moore McRae.

Robert enrolled in Miami Northwestern's performing arts program and the New World School of the Arts.

During his youth, it was unusual for boys to participate in modern dance classes. After being teased, he replied to a schoolmate: "I am going to become an artist, and when I return (to Liberty City) you will still be standing on the corner."

Robert Battle has returned. Thirty years later, the 37-year-old Miami-raised choreographer was named to carry the vision of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Company to new heights.

Unfortunately, Battle's Liberty City neighborhood has not fared as well. The riots did not result in sustainable revitalization of inner-city neighborhoods and many of those who stood on the corners in the 1980s are idle on the corners in 2010. Today the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater ends a week's run at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. For information, call 305-949-6722.

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