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ART GENTILE / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Leonard Bethel had the name of his street in New Britain Township changed to Layle Lane, after a black woman who was a pioneering teacher and advocate for underprivileged children. She ran a camp for them off Ferry Road.

Remembering an icon

Layle Lane was a unique and powerful figure who fought tirelessly to improve the lives of underprivileged children.

BY FRED A. SAVANA

STAFF WRITER

Her reach was far and wide, but history has made little note of Layle Lane.

From Bucks County to Mexico and Africa, the pioneering teacher, activist and tireless advocate for underprivileged children touched many lives.

New Britain Twp.

A black woman who sat with presidents and called W.E. B. DuBois, Pearl Buck and other prominent leaders of the time her friends, Lane also opened her New Britain Township farm to young black boys from Harlem and North Philadelphia.

Through the Depression until the

1950s hundreds of children learned the value of farming, self worth and pride at the little-known summer camp. It's widely believed that Eleanor Roosevelt, who was a friend of Lane, was so inspired by the New Britain camp that she encouraged her husband, Franklin Roosevelt, to use the model as he developed the Civilian Conservation Corps.

And while there are few areas that treasure history more than Bucks County, there is no information, no plaques, no historical markers to be found denoting Lane's remarkable

life and achievements.

Without the efforts of Leonard Bethel, whose mother, Anna Bethel Young, worked at the camp, Lane's legacy may have been left unknown.

As a teen, Leonard Bethel worked at the summer camp, learning the importance of education, hard work and finding honor in being black.

"She taught me to be proud of myself and my race," said Bethel. "She was a great influence and inspiration."

Now 72, the Rutgers professor

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emeritus and his wife, Veronica, also a professor, live in the New Britain Township home that was once his mother's.

A published author and historian, Bethel has written a comprehensive history of Lane, whom he calls "an American icon." He's hopeful the book will soon be published, allowing readers around the world to share in Lane's story.

Lane acquired the property off Ferry Road from her brother, who was only able to buy the land because of his light-colored skin, said Bethel. During the 1920s, said the historian, blacks, through "unwritten law," were forbidden from owning such a large amount of land.

"We admired her," said the 92-year-old Young. "She was very practical, very bright and very humble."

Although she had the ear of the influential of her time, she treated everyone with love and respect, remembered Young.

Among her many memories of those summers, Young recalled Lane hosting picnic lunches to guests such as DuBois and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche.

"She'd entertain this way, making dessert and having people with similar interests sit around on the lawn and discuss topics of the day," said Young.

"She was a very accomplished woman."

Deeply moved by Lane's efforts and influence, Bethel single handedly persuaded New Britain Township officials to change the name of the road where Lane spent her summers to Layle Lane in 1977. It had been Bescon Hill Road.

The tree-lined road is believed to be the only road in Pennsylvania named for a black woman, according to Bethel.

"They offered to put up a statue, but I said I didn't want something for pigeons to sit on," said Bethel with a laugh.

Today, Lane's name is barely known in the township, and few recall her camp. The Bucks County Historical Society has no readily found mention of Lane in its card catalogue.

It's not surprising she's not better known here, said Bethel, as Lane, "was ignored and invisible" during the decades she lived and worked in the largely white township.

He remembered taking the boys at the camp, which had about 20 children who came for eight weeks each summer, into Doylestown for hair cuts.

"The barbers, including one who was black, would not cut their hair," said Bethel, who still sounded insulted by the event more than 50 years ago.

"They thought they would lose business if people saw blacks in their shops," he remarked, adding, "so I cut their hair."

Young's family was among the dozen families given an opportunity to buy land and build a

house on the land after Lane closed the camp and subdivided the 30 acres in the early 1960s. Today, about half the families there are black.

The "settlement," as the group of homes is sometimes referred to, was named La Citadelle, after a fortress in Haiti which was built after the Haitians gained their freedom from France.

Lane personally selected those to whom she wanted to sell property, based on their character, not their color, said Bethel. Bucks County's first female judge, Harriet Mims, provided the legal support for the sales.

Despite her near anonymity in Bucks County, Lane, who died in 1976 at the age 82, led a life of enormous significance.

Raised in Vineland, N.J., after her parents fled the racially divided Georgia where she was born, Lane was a diminutive, yet forceful woman. Educated as a teacher, she was the first black to teach at Benjamin Franklin High School in New York City.

Lane spent much of her life involved with the Harlem Renaissance. She was one of just a few national leaders who met with President Franklin Roosevelt, convincing him anti-discrimination legislation was needed to protect federal workers.

She was a charter member of the American Federation of Teachers and ran unsuccessful campaigns for the New York state senate comptroller of New York City.

Unsatisfied with thinking in the Republican and Democratic parties, she joined the Socialist Party.

"She was brilliant and so articulate," said Maida Springer-Kemp, in a 2001 article for *American Educator*, a publication of the American Federation of Teachers.

Then 90, Kemp was one of the few people still alive who remembered Lane personally. "She was such a lady, gentle but strong. She knew who she was."

When others might have considered retiring, Lane set off to Mexico and Africa, where she again worked to better the lives of children, said Bethel.

"All she wanted was for kids to succeed," said Veronica Bethel, who traveled with her husband to see where Lane was buried in an unmarked grave in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

When they asked to see her resting place, Veronica Bethel said, it was as if they'd asked to see the grave of a saint.

"The ladies formed a parade and took us right to the gravesite, the only one with fresh flowers," said Veronica. "They admired her so much."

And in New Britain, Leonard said, Lane should be equally revered.

"This community needs to know about a person of this stature," he said. "The community needs to take pride in this."

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