

Will Davis brought Southern hospitality to the Valley



Will Davis held barbecues at his Forest Knolls home. Pig and collard greens were common. "There was some love in that food," said one neighbor. Photos courtesy of Dea Davis.

by Justin Nobel

Will Davis, a Forest Knolls resident who grew up in a segregated South Carolina farming town and found peace and love in the San Geronimo Valley where he hosted southern style barbecues and mentored troubled youths, died suddenly from a heart attack earlier this month. He was 55.

"We often mean a pillar of the community to be someone who is rich or from a family that has been there for a while," said one neighbor, "but Will was a real pillar of our community. He was there for so many children. His heart was three sizes too large and we all benefited from that."

Will was born July, 9 1950 and grew up on a small farm in Lake City in rural South Carolina—soybean, cotton and tobacco country. His father drove trucks for the Army and tilled a small patch of land. Will had an older sister and was the eldest of four brothers. The children attended all black schools. Teachers were strict, espe-

cially Miss Cooper.

"She liked Will because he was the teacher's pet," said brother Sammie. "He'd cry if he missed a day of school."

Will got straight A's and in high school set the record in the 100-yard dash.

But being a black child growing up in one of the most segregated states in the country in the 1950s and 1960s came with its share of hardships. Racism was rampant and while walking to school white neighbors would sic dogs on Will and his siblings. This led to a fear of dogs that lasted for most of Will's life.

He had difficulties getting along with his father, too, and his mom told him that to follow his dreams, Will needed to get out of South Carolina.

"She said, 'You're gonna have to leave the South or you're gonna get killed,'" said his wife Dea.

Will joined the Air Force and was stationed in Texas, the Philippines and then California. Afterwards, he moved to Valle-

jo, worked in a shipyard and lived with his brother Sammie. He served in the Army National Guard, and had children from several relationships. Will didn't visit home much in those years. Going back to South Carolina after seeing the rest of the world was difficult.

"Once you leave a place and get older you out-grow it," explained Sammie.

During his time in California Will returned to school, first to Solano Junior College then to San Francisco State, where he majored in black studies and later earned a master's in clinical counseling.

He established his own practice, specializing in treating traumatized Vietnam veterans and teenagers with drug problems. At a rehabilitation center for young adults in San Rafael he met Dea, a family therapist.

"We were kind of like the mom and pop," said Dea. "We saw so many kids wanting to have a sense of community and wanting something better."

Attracted by their disparate pasts and a deep, spiritual connection, the two fell in love.

"I had the white perspective and Will had the black perspective," said Dea. "That in itself was amazing. It was healing right off the bat."

As is common in the profession, Will had once dealt with his own substance issues, namely alcohol. Dea was determined to help him come clean for good; he was determined to spend the rest of his life with her.

"I said if you want to marry me stop drinking and smoking, and he did."

The couple was wed at Roy's Redwoods. Will wore an African cummerbund over his tuxedo and a bowtie of kente cloth. They symbolized their leap into a new life by jumping a broom, a custom common to slave weddings in the South.

Dea had grown up with three sisters

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and four brothers in Cairo, a small town in southern Georgia—tobacco and sugarcane country and at one time, slave country. Dea's family had been slave owners, and her youngest sister Reda spent a great deal of time poring through old family records, trying to come to grips with the family's past.

"In order to know where you're going you must know where you come from," said Reda, citing an African proverb.

Will learned his own line had likely come from the Yoruba people of Nigeria. His ancestors had lived on Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia, a swampy forested hideout where initially African Americans were able to carry on their own traditions free from white slave owners who couldn't cope with the widespread malaria.

Reda learned the rights of shamanism from a tribe in Burkina Faso. In a ceremony that involved throwing stones, bones and cowry shells and calling upon shamans, she divined that to settle his past Will needed to visit the grave of his father, and shed a tear.

The couple returned to the Deep South. After laying flowers on Will's father's grave they traveled to Georgia to see Dea's family, who had yet to meet Will.

"He was scared to death," said Dea. "We definitely have some good ole boy energy in our family."

"I'll tell you the truth, when we first found out that Dea and Will were going to be married it was a shock to us," said Diane, Dea's eldest sister. "Then he came—he was the type of person who walked into any situation and made you feel at ease."

"Our brothers recognized he's a pretty good guy," added Debra, the second eldest, "and he loved our little sister."

"I feel that we have cleaned up a beautiful lineage," said Dea. "The holy waters can now flow in a way I don't know if they have ever flowed before."

Back in San Geronimo Dea and Will concentrated on raising her son Jessie and their daughter Rhea.

"He worshipped her like nothing I've ever seen," said Rebecca Teague, whose daughter AnnaBiko met Rhea at the San Geronimo Valley School. "She was the love of his life."

Will took the girls on shopping sprees at the Salvation Army or to Vallejo to get their hair done.

"He was the parent who would do anything with the kids," said Rebecca. "He took them on these crazy adventures."

He introduced AnnaBiko to Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder and Motown music. He often picked up Dea from school wearing colorful dashikis.

"Anna is named after a black man and I grew up in a black neighborhood," added Rebecca, "but really at the end of the day I'm white and I live in a white community. Will was our access to the black community. His death is a huge loss."

This spring, Will helped lead a lecture and film series about race with valley residents Aninha Esperanza and Cory Vangelder at the community center. During one meeting, a rope was passed around

and each member tied a knot before discussing their own knot with race. "At the end we untied the knots and talked about our hopes and dreams," said Aninha.

Will also helped unite the races with food. Victoria Carr-Bloom lived just across the street in Forest Knolls but didn't meet Will until they shared a class at the Institute of Imaginal Studies in Petaluma, where Will had returned to get a Ph.D. in psychology.

"Soon he was inviting me over for his fa-



Will and Dea Davis met while counseling teens at a San Rafael rehabilitation center.

mous barbecues," said Victoria. "He really understood Southern hospitality. He made his house like a little community center."

Pig and collard greens were popular, as was the fire pit over which the food was cooked and the drum circle that sometimes gathered around it.

"You were smiling when you were eating," said another Forest Knolls neighbor. "There was some love in that food."

"He related to the hippie spirit of the valley," said Dea. "Occasionally he would want to go back to Vallejo and see brown faces, but it felt like home to him here. He brought a lot of healing to this community; most of them have never grown up with a black man."

One of the last patients Will saw was a longshoreman he met through Norman

McLeod, who aids shipyard workers recovering from drug and alcohol addiction find mentors up and down the California coast.

"He was kinda one of them knuckleheads but Will talked to him and got on his level," said Norman. "He was so appreciative to have him in his life. Will had the proper attitude as an individual to help another human being out."

On Saturday at the San Geronimo Valley School, a throng of friends and family from all corners of the country gathered to

"Rhea—I saw Will at Borders a few weeks ago. We had a great chat. After we said goodbye I went back and gave him a big hug and told him how much I loved him. I know he was my brother. I miss him but I also know he is still here."

A man with a guitar took the stage and children gathered on leopard-print pillows. Others recited poetry. One woman taught the crowd how to do a dance called the "dip."

Afterwards the kids flocked to the school's playground, where a setting sun cast long shadows of small children across the macadam.

I sat on a step with Reda, who wore a necklace of coral beads and a billowy African shirt used in female rites of passage.

"What Mr. Will was about, and what my sister was about, was creating tribes and coming back home to the village," said Reda. "Elders are responsible for guiding youth and we live in a time when elders forget to be guides for youth. Young people have been on their own for too long and they're stumbling and they're fumbling. Will reached out to young people of all races and colors. He just saw the heart of a human, he never saw the color."

A warm wind blew rose petals past our feet and jostled the branches of willows beyond the school yard. Kids huddled around a red picnic table, laughing. Others hopskotched on a freshly chalked course. Overhead birds of prey rode the thermals skywards.

"This is what it's all about," she said, nodding towards the children.

A girl in a flowing white dress approached us with Rhea at her side. Rhea wore black boots topped with tufts of fur and a purple dress lined with plastic gems. Both girls had on sunglasses. They looked like princesses.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Rhea asked in a mock British accent.

"Yes please," I said.

I joined my thumb to my middle finger to form an imaginary cup and Rhea extended an imaginary kettle and poured.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Good," I replied.

"Jolly good?"

Will is survived by his beloved wife, Dea Rackley Davis and their children, Rhea Grace Davis and Jessie Gaynor of Forest Knolls, Cassandra Davis, Yvonne, Akaliah, Ellery Davis, Orlando McClain, Frederick, and John and William Davis; his mother, Mable Davis of Lake City, S.C.; his siblings, Joan "Slim" Williams of Coward, S.C., Paul "Stuff" Davis of Columbia, S.C., Samuel "Bo" Davis of Plumas Lake, and Johnny "Cuda" Davis of Vallejo; as well as many grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Will was preceded in death by his daughter, Ashanti "B-eeke" Davis of Vallejo and his father, John William Davis of Lake City, S.C. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to The Davis Family Fund, P.O. Box 635, Forest Knolls, California 94933.

remember Will in a sunlit room with sorbet-colored walls. There was fried chicken and chicken schnitzel, cornbread and pita bread. A turquoise tapestry decorated with golden elephants hung above a table set with items of remembrance: a striped African wood carving and one of a woman balancing a water jug on her head, a lavender cloth coiled like a serpent and a wooden snake with a stork etched across its stomach. There was a Malcolm X book and one of Nelson Mandela's favorite African folktales. Beside a photo of Will squirting lighter fluid into a billowing orange flame was a journal meant for words about Will.

A man in a polo shirt examined the log. He picked up the pen, noted what others had written, paused for several moments and began to write: