

Pioneers
Dr. Mamie Parker
By John Bryan

The time is four decades ago.

Mamie Parker—this year’s salutatorian of Arkansas’ Wilmot High School—searches for a topic for her graduation speech. This African-American girl—the youngest of an 11-child family in one of the poorest counties in the nation—doesn’t know that she will one day live in the nation’s richest county and administer a \$250 million budget, 2,400 employees, 300 field stations and much more as the Assistant Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Mamie considers what has shaped her young life. At the top of the list are her mother and the outdoors—themes that will become touchstones for future speeches: for Harvard, for the Aspen Institute, for Congress, and for the Bill Gates Millennium Scholars.

Mamie considers her mother, Cora Parker: a single-parent sharecropper who has given her children an appreciation for the value of people and a drive for education. “If you think education is expensive,” Cora would say, “try ignorance.”

Lessons from Cora Parker will flavor Mamie’s life and leadership style. Mamie’s “Invest in People” initiative will increase employee productivity for conservation during her years as Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s New England Region.

Mamie considers her love for bugs and snakes and worms and catfish. She was Cora Parker’s last chance to make one of her children into a fishing companion and a lover of the outdoors. Her classrooms have been southeast Arkansas’ and northwest Louisiana’s waters including Bayou Bartholomew—at 359 miles, billed as the world’s longest bayou, and filled with 117 species of fish. Mamie’s love is fishing these waters.

In a few years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will recruit Mamie from a biology class at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service representative Hannibal Bolton will ask her class, “Who likes to fish?” Mamie’s raised hand will lead to her career—one that will include a tremendous influence on fisheries and habitat nationwide through her positions in Wisconsin, Missouri, Minnesota, Georgia, Massachusetts and Washington D.C. Her accomplishments will include putting the Atlantic salmon on the endangered species list, negotiating with General Motors to clean up the Hudson, and restoring passage for salmon, shad, alewives and eels on the Penobscot River.

On Mamie’s mind this senior year is disturbing news about pollution—including mercury and pesticides—threatening fish habitat. Perhaps this is a theme for her graduation speech.

The epiphany for the speech arrives in a song by Marvin Gaye: “Inner City Blues.” A line in the song gets Mamie’s attention: “Make me wanna holler and throw up both my hands!” That’s how she feels about pollutants, and she determines that her graduation speech is an opportunity to challenge her classmates to see that they all have responsibilities.

“I’ve been blessed to be able to touch lives through my voice. That’s my gift,” Mamie will say in future years after having success engaging the energies of diverse people and organizations to help fisheries and habitat. Hannibal Bolton—who will become a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Assistant Director himself—will say, “Mamie’s demeanor and approach remove all skepticism. It’s all about them and not about Mamie.”

High school senior Mamie Parker will one day become an architect, catalyst, and leader for the most important and expansive fish habitat program in the history of the nation. Her *magnum opus* will be the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, a plan that will engage partnerships among federal, state, local, and non-governmental organizations.

Mamie’s graduation speech is informed by her passion for catching bass and catfish and grinders with cane poles and nightcrawlers, and by her mother’s life lessons. It is received enthusiastically by the whole town—high school graduation is a whole-town affair in little Wilmot.

In the next century the whole town will gather for another Mamie Parker speech—this time in Little Rock for her induction speech into a previously all-white club: the Arkansas Outdoor Hall of Fame. Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee will do the honors. October 14, Mamie’s birthday, will be declared “Mamie Parker Day.” The whole town will buy copies of the full-page-spread newspaper and save them, as Mamie’s sister Debra will say, “for bragging rights.”

As Mamie looks at her graduation audience she recognizes a secret feeling that she will never fully overcome: a feeling of inadequacy, of not belonging. She is a poor black girl integrated into a white school system, and she will become a black female scientist—a Ph.D. limnologist—in a white male domain. But this feeling will anneal Mamie’s passionate belief in the value of individual persons.

Sister Debra will say this in 2011: “Mamie’s accomplished a great deal, but I think she’s still driven to succeed . . . and wants to make sure others get the same chance at success as she did.”

Mamie’s future is a singular trailblazing career that will protect and restore fish habitat in places as focused as Pennsylvania’s coal-mine-damaged Williams Run, and as grand as the 295,710-square-mile Great Lakes Basin. Also in her future—after over 29 years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—is MA Parker Associates: her executive coaching and public speaking company. There will be many more speeches and interviews and consultations, all of which will summon her mother’s constant charge: “Keep going and growing.”