

## COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

# Educators, community remember Eliot Battle

By [Shaina Cavazos](#)

June 12, 2013 | 5:25 p.m. CDT



Eliot Battle visits with friends, a group of regulars, on the morning of Feb. 22, 2012, at Hy-Vee Cafe. Battle's pioneering role in desegregating Columbia schools is featured in the documentary, "Battle: Change From Within." ; [Katie Alaimo](#)

*Longtime Columbia educator [Eliot Battle died Tuesday at age 88](#). Columbia residents and educators offered their remembrances of his life and impact on the community. Missouriian reporters will continue to update this story throughout the day.*

## Russell Thompson, past Columbia schools superintendent

### MoreStory

### Related Articles

[Eliot Battle, Columbia educator involved in desegregation, dies](#)

[Eliot Battle through the years](#)

COLUMBIA — Russell Thompson, a former superintendent of the Columbia Public School System remembers taking a trip through the south with Battle to recruit minority teachers.

Sitting in a restaurant in Baton Rouge and waiting for their food to arrive, Battle mused that when he was growing up he would have

[VIDEO: Eliot Battle remembers](#)

[FROM THE ARCHIVE: Gene Robertson touts Battle's 'change from within' philosophy](#)

[FROM READERS: Eliot Battle 'found me in the middle of giving up'](#)

[FROM READERS: Eliot Battle made a 'personal investment of time in me'](#)

[FROM READERS: Collected tributes to Eliot Battle](#)

needed to go to the back door of the restaurant to be served.

"He was not bitter at all," Thompson said. "Eliot was positive about everything he did, but he was also very tolerant of the shortcomings of others. "

Thompson had first met Battle when they were faculty members at Hickman High School.

"He believed what binds us on this earth is greater than what separates us," said Russell. "This underlying conviction influenced his work with children, with faculty, with parents and the community."

## **Darwin Hindman, former mayor of Columbia**

Former Columbia Mayor Darwin Hindman remembers Battle as a helpful adviser and active campaigner.

During his tenure as mayor, Hindman created a task force to address race relations in Columbia and frequently sought Battle's counsel.

"I always appreciated his advice. I thought it was sound, and I thought he took a very good approach to this issue," Hindman said.

Hindman held Battle and his wife, Muriel Battle, in high esteem for their work in the city's school system and improving race relations in Columbia.

"They believed in improving the educational opportunities for everybody, including African Americans and minorities."

## **Albert George Miller, graduate of Hickman High School**

Albert George Miller, who earned his doctorate at Princeton University and has taught for the past 22 years at Oberlin College, said he never would have gone to college had it not been for Eliot Battle.

Miller grew up with the Battles, witnessing first-hand how they integrated the schools in Columbia. He was the curious kid who rang their doorbell the first day they moved in and asked what they were doing in his neighbors' house. Muriel Battle patiently explained they were the new neighbors, he said. And she ended up being his first-grade teacher.

In fifth grade, he finally persuaded his mother to let him attend the newly integrated Grant Elementary School like the Battle children.

"If they could go to Grant School, then so could I," he said.

As a high school student, Miller said his academic career took a "very different turn." He was in and out of school throughout his junior and senior years, maintained a strong D-minus average and was told by a new counselor that more than likely, no college would take him.

Exiting the counselor's office dejected and depressed, Miller wandered past Battle's office and waved. He had kept a close relationship with the Battles, so much so that they always called him by his first name, Albert, rather than the initials, "A.G." he went by.

Battle saw him wave and called him over.

"Albert, are you OK?" he asked. "Come on in my office."

Miller explained his previous conversation with the counselor and how he probably wouldn't be going to college. At the time, work for black people in Columbia was more limited; the thought of menial work, such as janitors and kitchen staff, though honorable, Miller said, depressed him.

"Well, that's not necessarily true," Battle said of Miller's seemingly nonexistent college prospects. "You can get into Mizzou if you apply."

Miller was bewildered. How could that be true? With his record, there's no way he'd be accepted at MU. Battle told him that as a land grant university, MU had to accept him, even if only on probation.

Together, Battle and Miller filled out the application. Three or four weeks later, he received a letter congratulating him on his acceptance to MU. The rest, Miller said, was history.

"My path in life literally changed the day he intervened," Miller said.

## **Norm Gysbers, Curators Distinguished Professor**

Norm Gysbers, Curators Distinguished Professor in the Department of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology at MU, met Battle in 1963, when he was the guidance counselor at Hickman High School.

"Whenever you saw Eliot, he always had a smile, and you knew you were important to him," Gysbers said.

Gysbers said he and Battle collaborated for 35 to 40 years about the field of guidance and counseling in schools.

"He was a great person to be around because you knew what he stood for," Gysbers said. "It was always a joy to meet him and talk to him."

Besides working as a guidance counselor, Gysbers said Battle helped the field of counseling and guidance progress in terms of diversity.

"He was a very effective leader for a number of reasons: his caring personality, his knowledge and skill and his ability to bring people together to work together," Gysbers said.

Gysbers said that Battle's real strength was that he modeled what he believed.

"He didn't have to tell you, you saw it, which is to me, the most effective form of leadership," Gysbers said.

## **Julie Middleton, producer and director of Battle documentary**

Julie Middleton, an executive producer and co-director of a documentary about Eliot Battle titled "Battle: Change from Within," knew Battle and his wife, Muriel Battle, for years.

After settling in Columbia in 1985, Middleton and her husband, Michael Middleton, both MU graduates, quickly connected with the Battles. For her husband it was a reunion with an old mentor. For Middleton, however, it was an opportunity to learn more about the Columbia School System.

"Everybody told me: 'You need to talk to the Battles.'"

While producing the documentary, the filmmakers interviewed organizational leaders and community activists as well as city, MU and public school officials.

"We set out to tell the story of Eliot Battle, but the community told the story," Middleton said. "You come away with the understanding of the tremendous impact he had on the community."

For half a year the filmmakers saw Battle regularly, visiting him several times a week to look over photos and documents. "We practically lived with him over a six-month period," Middleton said.

"Eliot was just a person you always looked forward to seeing," said Michael Hicks, one of the documentary's directors. "He always made you comfortable and was always interested in hearing about you."

Since its premiere in February 2012, the film has won a Telly award and the Best Heartland Feature Documentary award at the Kansas City Film Festival.

A screening of the documentary will be held June 27 at the MU Reynolds Alumni Center. Battle was scheduled to participate in a panel discussion after the screening.

"We want to celebrate his life and all the contributions he made to the university and the community," Middleton said.

## **Gene Robertson, professor emeritus at MU**

When Gene Robertson was recruited to visit MU for the first time in 1971, he said he wouldn't even

consider moving from Wisconsin to Missouri before he talked to members of the African-American community. He was immediately directed to Eliot and Muriel Battle. They were the de facto ambassadors.

"He was very much committed to illustrating and modeling behaviors that showed that African Americans were contributing members of society rather than recipients of just the resources of society," said Robertson, the second African-American faculty member hired at MU.

Eliot Battle died Tuesday night. He was 88.

"I guess the thing that I personally will remember him for is having him respond to me when I would say to Eliot, 'Hello, how are you, Eliot?'"

"I'm hitting on 100," he'd answer with a smile, implying he was at the very top of his game.

Robertson said Battle was always pleasant and positive, whether he was talking with friends or colleagues. He valued his family and was incredibly proud of his children. He never had a negative thing to say about anyone.

Not even, as it turns out, about politicians.

"When there was an election and you drove past Eliot's home, on the lawn would be everybody's placard who's running. It wasn't in his nature to be negative," Robertson said.

The 2008 election of President Barack Obama left an especially deep mark. Robertson spent time at Battle's house during the last part of the televised election results. The makeup of the room demonstrated some of the work Battle did toward integration in Columbia: black and white people, sitting together, watching the election of the first African-American president.

"He was overjoyed when Obama was elected because that was the epitome of what he was all about," Robertson said. "To show that African Americans are as good as anybody else."

In Columbia, Eliot and Muriel Battle led the charge to integrate the community, developing strong ties to both MU and Columbia Public Schools. Battle started a number of black men's groups, including The Guardians and the Minority Men's Network, which is still operating. He was firmly entrenched in the community and showed his commitment in how he worked with and related to its people.

"The richest part of Eliot is what he was as a person," Robertson said. "Although he was an excellent educator and he contributed to education heavily, the richest part of his was the personal reaction that he gave to everyone. And you never got the impression that it was false."

## **Leigh Spence, guidance counselor at Battle High School**

Years after the fact, Leigh Spence, guidance counselor at Battle High School, remembers a conversation with her son. He had just come home from a shopping trip to Walgreens.

"Mom, the nicest man was talking to me today at Walgreens," he said.

"Yeah?" Spence answered.

"He was asking me about my plans for the future and what I thought I'd do with my life."

Her son didn't know the man but thought he looked familiar. He described the man's striking blue eyes, which gave Spence the clue she needed.

"Oh, that's Mr. Battle," she said.

"Even when he was out in the community, he had his guidance counselor hat on," Spence said in a phone call Wednesday morning. "He was always learning about what kids were doing with their lives."

Eliot Battle was a guidance counselor at Hickman High School for almost 40 years, and even after he retired, he was known as an educational force in Columbia. He could recognize students from the late '60s and '70s by name, Spence said, and was never more excited than when he could be present for the dedication of Muriel Williams Battle High School.

"He shared with Dr. Presko that it was one of the greatest days of his life," Spence said. "He is honestly the kindest person who just exudes dignity and kindness to everyone. If Mr. Battle gave his seal of approval for something, that was high praise."

Before the Battle High School dedication luncheon, Spence said she saw Mr. Battle walking up the long walkway to the high school by himself and ran over to make sure he was doing OK.

"Mr. Battle, how are you?" she asked.

"Pretty well for 88! And you're looking good," he replied.

"That's just the way he is — always putting something positive back to the other person," Spence said. "He was such a fun, kind person who really enjoyed being with people. I know we're just going to miss him terribly."

*We would love to hear from readers who knew Eliot Battle. What do you most hope is remembered about him? Leave comments below or send your thoughts to [submissions@ColumbiaMissourian.com](mailto:submissions@ColumbiaMissourian.com).*

*Missourian reporters Hannah Wiese and Arthur Cook Bremer contributed to this report.*

*Supervising editor is [Scott Swafford](#).*