

Nomination of Ann Miller Woodford for the 2018 Mountain Heritage Award

Historian, author, artist, and community activist Ann Miller Woodford is on a mission to make visible the “invisible history” of African American communities in far western North Carolina. From the 1998 inaugural event of the One Dozen Who Care—a three-day festival of African American Gospel music and “Gathering of the Elders” oral history project—to the 2015 publication of “When All God’s Children Get Together: A Celebration of the Lives and Music of African American People in Far Western North Carolina,” Woodford has made it her life’s work to collect and preserve the stories and culture of the African American communities and individuals in the southern Appalachian mountains.

Ann’s work is important not only to the communities and individuals portrayed in her book, but also to the scholarly community, to students, and to anyone interested in Appalachian culture and history. As historian John C. Inscoe notes in his Foreword, *“While the scholarship of the region has come a long way, in many respects our documentation of day-to-day life for black Appalachians still remains far too fleeting, too impressionistic, and too reliant on white sources. Ann Woodford’s efforts to collect, chronicle, and preserve the lives and culture of African-American communities and individuals in the Great Smoky Mountains have much enriched our understanding of what our Appalachian heritage means, and how much richer and more varied it comes to be when viewed in such multi-colored hues.”*

One of the primary goals of One Dozen Who Care, Inc., an African American women-led nonprofit founded by Woodford in 1998, is to preserve African American culture and heritage. Over the past twenty years, annual events that have fulfilled that goal are an Elder Dinner honoring senior citizens for their community service, and the Multicultural Women’s Development Conference, bringing women of many cultures and backgrounds together for a two-day experience focused on cultural exchange, health, education, and entrepreneurship.

Other ODWC projects include the 2015 publication of “When All God’s Children Get Together” book, the establishment of the Purl Miller African American Book Collection at the Andrews Public Library, the Multicultural Resource Guide, and the Martin Luther King Storytellers Guild, designed as a tool for educating people on racism, culture, and history.

In 2016, Woodford began an ongoing partnership with WCU, working with faculty, staff, and students to provide wider public access to the information contained in the “All

God's Children" book. During Fall 2016, students in Dr. Andrew Denson's "Southern History & Memory" class created digital mini-exhibits on themes drawn from Ann Woodford's book, which are now posted on Hunter Library's Digital Initiatives website.

In 2017, Woodford planned, raised funds, and directed an ambitious year-long project involving multiple partners, including WCU, nine churches, two community centers, and two arts organizations, with venues in throughout western North Carolina. She served as Mountain Heritage Center guest curator, working with MHC staff, Dr. Denson, and WCU students to create a series of "All God's Children" exhibits that supported African-American gospel music programs and other community events in Sylva, Murphy, and Waynesville. All of the gospel music events were documented by video and still photography for use in a future documentary, which will also include footage from the 1998 All God's Children event. Ann also presented educational programs at 24 schools, churches, libraries, and other community venues. A gifted visual artist and singer, Ann uses her paintings as a springboard for storytelling, and frequently encourages her audiences to join her in impromptu singing sessions.

Ann continues to present All God's Children programs in educational venues including Western Carolina University, Young Harris College, Mars Hill University, and Smoky Mountain High School, and for community groups including Folkmoot, the Macon Folk Heritage Association, and the Sons of the Confederate Veterans.

The original All God's Children exhibit is now in its second year of travel, currently at the Valletown Cultural Arts Center in Andrews and then moving to the Cashiers Historical Society. Ann uses a smaller version of the exhibit in her community presentations. Locally focused All God's Children exhibits are now permanently installed at Liberty Baptist Church in Sylva, the Texana Community Development Center in Murphy, and the Pigeon Community Multicultural Development Center in Waynesville. Ann has frequently served as a consultant for other cultural preservation projects, including the Clay County Historical and Arts Council's African American community history exhibit and slave cemetery preservation project.

Ann comments on the value of preserving community history in the Preface of her book:

"My hope is that this book will succeed in answering the question, 'Do any African Americans live out here, and if so, where in the world are they?' Now is the right time to show that our lives have meaning and that we are here because of the tenacity of our ancestors and their determination to survive...Unfortunately most of the history has passed away with the deaths of our elders, whose progeny failed to record their stories. It is my deepest hope that one day more of

the history of these special people will be written, and that none of them will ever be forgotten.”

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