

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Cora Crawford was a pillar of a new community

Tracy Conrad

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Cora Crawford gently laughed when she told the story of her first year in college in Texas studying to be a nurse. She was interested in nurturing. But she figured out pretty quickly she was “afraid of dead people” and instead decided to change careers and go into education. The decision was a fortunate one for the children of Palm Springs.

Crawford came to the desert from Carthage, Texas, in 1951, when her husband, Samuel, came back to collect her and bring her West. He had heard that there were plenty of jobs in the desert that paid pretty well and set out for a better life, hoping to get established. He got a job with Earl Neel at the Palm Springs Nursery and soon returned to Carthage to bring Cora back with him to California. The couple landed on Section 14, in the middle of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, and rented a house from Samuel’s brother and his wife. With a place to live, Cora and Samuel started a family.

By the mid-1950s it was widely known that the tribe wanted to develop their land and residents of Section 14 were to move. Cora said that she worried all the time about where she would find a new home for her family.

In 1955, the Crawfords took action and moved off the reservation into an apartment owned by Lawrence Crossley, remodeled out of barracks buildings that had once housed Italian prisoners of war on the grounds of the El Mirador. Crossley had purchased the buildings from the military after the war and moved them to his property east of the little village. Crossley rented apartments to many families leaving Section 14.

Cora wanted a house like she’d had back in Carthage. She thought of going back to Texas. She recalled putting down 900 or so dollars on a house on Highway III at Windy Point.

But the sale didn’t go through; the sellers inexplicably decided not to sell. She wrote a number of letters rather than call, even though she had a phone. She had been to one year of college in



Cora Crawford in 2009.

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the best hot lunches in the city for over 150 children.

Crawford proudly recalled that the kids from the Child Care Center were way ahead of their grade level when they matriculated to Katherine Finchy School. She was told to stick to pre-school curriculum, but she pushed her students, sending her little graduates to Vista Del Monte and Cielo Vista schools. The children on her street integrated Ca- huilla school.

In the mid-1970s, Crawford was the chair of the advisory council that would help the city build the Unity Community Center, now called James O. Jesse Desert Highland Unity Center. The facility had a drop-in sports program where kids could play basketball, badminton and volleyball, as well as organized sport leagues. Physical fitness classes, modeling, drama and tutoring were also available. Crawford pushed to have legal counseling, youth counseling and even blood pressure screenings.

By the 1980s, the Child Care Center had grown to accommodate hundreds of children of all races, about 85% of whom were from single-parent families. Crawford was a founding member of the Palm Springs Black History Committee and the yearly celebration parade the group stages. She worked to raise money for scholarships to send older children to college.

On Tuesday, April 6, 2021, Cora Crawford passed away at age 87 after a life of service and caring for others. The community celebrated her in grand style. She is survived by her children, numerous grandchildren and many others in the community who knew and loved her including scores of her students. Palm Springs is a town that was built by resourceful and industrious women pioneers. Cora Crawford rates as one of that remarkable group. She created the community infrastructure that made the city of Palm Springs responsible to working-class residents and nurtured generations of children.

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Texas and “had sense enough to know not to sign” the paperwork sent to her. She consulted the realtor for whom she had been working cleaning house while her children were at school.

The papers she had received specified she would pay \$300 and only get the balance of her money back. Instead, the realtor helped her draft the appropriate response and she fortunately got all her \$900 back.

She saw other houses advertised for sale in the Gateway Estates neighborhood on the way back from Windy Point, but was told they were not available when she asked to see them. She never said, but it was understood it was because she and her husband were Black.

Persisting, Cora and Samuel bought a lot from a man who used to sit on the porch of his house in Section 14, she said a “Mr. Campbell.” The Crawfords couldn’t get a loan from any bank in Palm Springs, so went to San Geronio Savings and Loan in Banning. With that loan, they built a house in the Gateway neighborhood and moved from their barrack apartment in September 1960. Many of their neighbors had also moved from Section 14. The community grew up around her, and there were lots of little kids.

In January 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty. Sargent Shriver took the lead in assembling a panel of experts to develop a comprehensive child development program that would help communities meet the needs of disadvantaged preschool children. Part of this program paid the tuition and other expenses to become certified to teach. Cora took advantage of the opportunity and went to College of the Desert where she became a Head Start teacher.

Pastor Rollins and First Baptist Church in conjunction with other community activists opened the doors of the Palm Springs Child Development Center in April 1964. The facility was soon acclaimed as one of the top preschool day-care facilities in California. Crawford was part of the original teaching staff. Serving low-income children as well as providing low-cost private childcare, it truly became the center, the heart, of the community.

Crawford worked tirelessly. She became the director of the Palm Springs Development Center in 1972 and within a year, under her careful and caring direction, the center was open daily, all day from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and offered arts, crafts, field trips, and some of