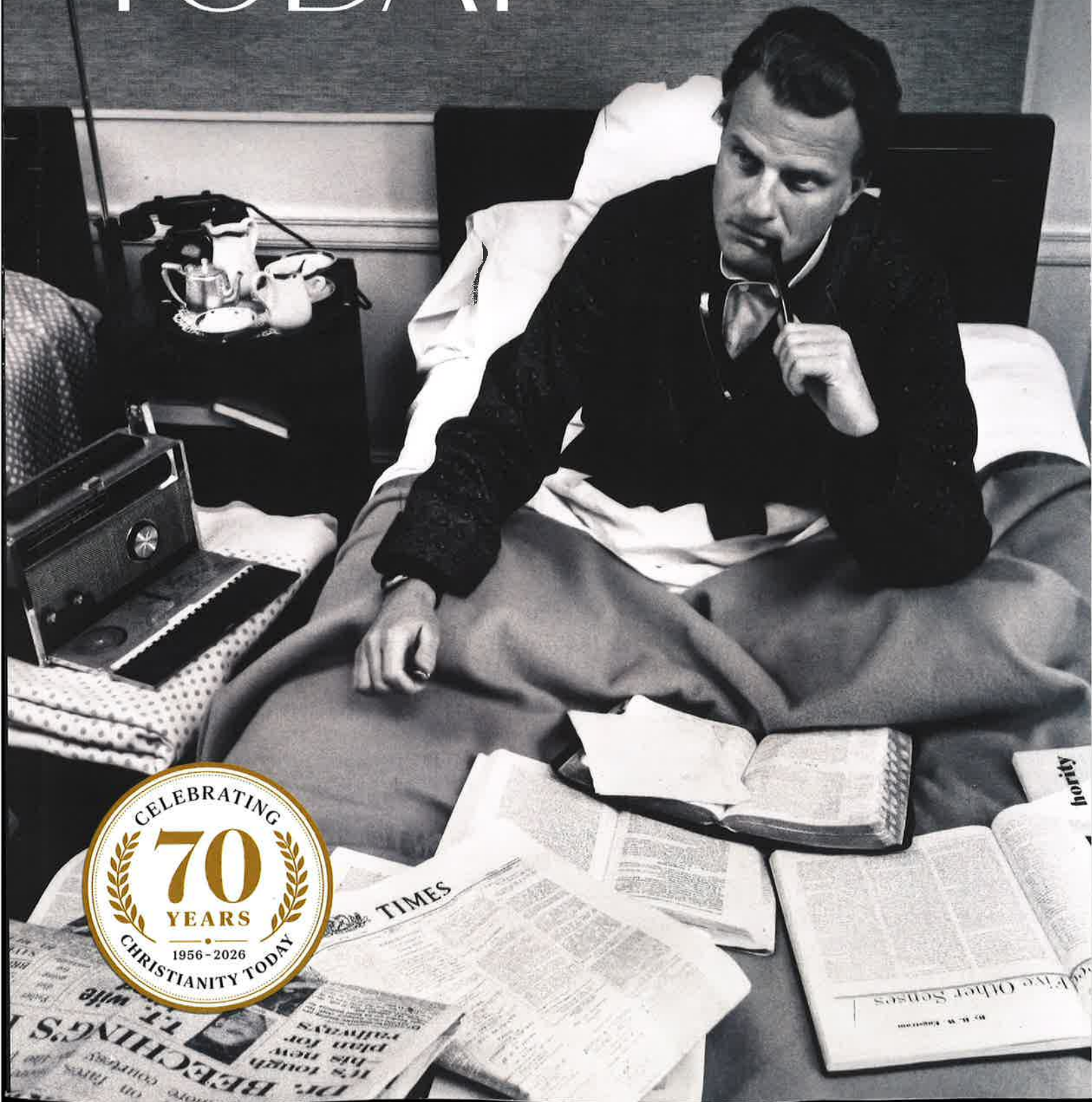


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EDUCATION

The 91-Year-Old Texas Educator Still Following God's Lead

After 67 years, Barbara Yarbrough continues to work in the school district to which God called her in 1959, shaping generations of families for the better.

BY CARRIE MCKEAN

On July 17, 1959, when she was almost 24 years old and not quite a graduate of Texas Southern University, Barbara Yarbrough signed a contract to teach art at a public high school in a place she'd never been: Midland, Texas. The school was George Washington Carver Junior-Senior High School, Midland's segregated campus for Black students.

When she got off the bus in Midland, Yarbrough saw the town for what it was: windswept, flat, and barren, not a tree in sight. She called her aunt and asked for money to get a ticket back to Houston.

"You don't understand," she remembers crying on the phone. "I've moved to hell."

Her aunt, who had children to raise at home and bills to pay, refused. "I don't think you understand, Barbara," she recalls her aunt retorting. "You can't come home. Get to work. Pay your rent. Buy your food. And send the rest of your money home. You'll figure it out."

At 91, some 67 years later, Yarbrough is still working in Midland's public schools. She's become both a local legend—in 2014, the district named an elementary school after her—and a

nationally recognized educator. But these accolades pale in comparison with the legacy visible any time she meets her former students around town. Yarbrough has an uncanny knack for remembering them all, though they number in the thousands. She recalls nicknames, fistfights, and whether she'd had to tell them to tuck in their shirts or sit up straight.

Known for her sharp wit, uncompromising high standards, fierce advocacy, and unwavering love, Yarbrough retired from teaching in 1996. Yet she still works part-time as the parent liaison at one of Midland's poorest elementary schools, overseeing the campus clothing closet and food pantry and generally serving as a bridge between parents—many of whom belong to families she's known and taught for generations now—and the school administration.

By some estimates, the US loses 7 percent of its teachers each year, which makes Yarbrough's perseverance unusual. But working in schools has always been her mission and ministry. Undergirding her steady presence is her love for Jesus Christ and her trust in God's unwavering faithfulness, a relationship that grew out of her own suffering.

"I was a little kid who had everything," Yarbrough recalls. "But from 8 o'clock one evening to 3 o'clock the next, life as I knew it was gone."

Her mother went into a hospital and never came out, dying from tuberculosis when Yarbrough was 8 years old. Because Louisiana "didn't have cemeteries for Black folk in those days," she said, the family buried her on the side of a road.

Her father turned to the bottle for comfort, and Barbara had to grow up overnight, worrying about where to find food and shoes without holes for herself and her little brother and bouncing around 14 different homes. Eventually her aunt and uncle took in Yarbrough and her siblings, but she was still angry and confused.

"I cussed God out, and everybody who said something to me, I cussed them out," she said. "I sat on the steps while it was raining one day, and I said, 'Come get me, God. I just want to die and be with my mama.'"

But God didn't come get her. She kept on living, and with each passing day, something in her slowly shifted. Her anger turned to a question: "Okay, Lord, I'm still here, so what is your job for

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so what is your
job for me this
day? What am
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me this day? What am I supposed to be doing for you?”

It’s a question she’s never stopped asking. In the fiery furnace of Yarbrough’s childhood, God forged a strength of character that she’s passed to generations of students in her classrooms: Learn to take care of yourself. Be respectful of others. No person is better or worse than you; everyone is walking their own hard road you know nothing about. Treat people with kindness. You are not a victim of your circumstances; take responsibility for your own actions and your own life. Work hard.

After the segregated junior-senior high closed in 1968, when Midland’s schools finally integrated, Yarbrough worked on other campuses. She taught equally the children of powerful oil executives and of undocu-

mented immigrants who spoke no English. To her, all children are the same—unique, of course, but not exceptional by birthright.

Yarbrough paid no mind to parents who fussed over her high expectations and strict standards, expecting their clout or influence to garner special treatment for their children. As she tells it, Yarbrough loved their children too much to make exceptions. And she trusts God with all the children he has entrusted to her, even when they fail algebra or go through a rocky patch. After all, he’s proven himself faithful in her own journey.

“God is so good. He knew me. I was angry with the world, and he knew I needed to get it all out of my system,” she said. “God is the same, but he’s not the same to each of us. He fixes us each in the way that we need to be fixed. We don’t come out of the Crock-Pot the same.”

And to Yarbrough, that’s part of the delight of teaching. Students don’t need special treatment to achieve great things. They need structure, high expectations, and someone who believes they can get back up when they fail. And through it all, they need people in their lives who let go of trying to control the outcomes, trusting that wherever the children’s lives go—even if it isn’t where their parents expect—God can find them there.

Along the way, Yarbrough prays her students learn to walk ever more closely with the

Shepherd guiding their paths. “‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,’” she said, recalling the 23rd Psalm, which her second-grade teacher had her memorize in 1936. “I don’t know what he does for you, but I know what he does for me, and he restores my soul.” ■

Carrie McKean is a West Texas-based writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *Texas Monthly* magazine.

