

Loretta J. Alexander is a pillar of strength, character, courage and compassion.

In conjunction with Women's History Month, which is celebrated all over the country each year in March, last year she was selected Outstanding Woman Business Owner by the Tuskegee Area Chamber of Commerce.

The owner of Loretta's University Cleaners on West Montgomery Road is a native of Greenwood, Mississippi. This is where she witnessed men and women of great character who influenced her during her formative years. Her family was deeply entrenched in the Civil Rights Movement at the height of racial tensions in Mississippi. Her uncle Aaron Johnson was pastor of the church that was home base for the movement in their Mississippi town. In addition to being a minister, her uncle Aaron also owned a barbershop and everybody went there for grooming and grass roots congregating.

Character was also a virtue demonstrated by other relatives including Loretta's uncle John Henry Johnson who became superintendent of Greenwood public schools. As a young woman, Loretta was a Civil Rights foot soldier. She registered black voters in Mississippi towns, drove black people to voting polls and organized mass meetings. She admits to being somewhat fearful but says the determination to advance civil rights for black people was far more powerful.

She earned a Bachelors degree at Tougaloo College, majoring in History and Black Studies. She completed Masters degree studies in Early Childhood Education at Jackson State University. In 1972, her ex-husband accepted a job in Auburn and moved the family to Tuskegee. After their divorce, she chose to stay because she and her children were firmly entrenched in this city. She has fond memories of those early years including a working relationship with Reverend Lawrence Haygood, Sr. and other people in Tuskegee who treated her like family.

There was always an entrepreneurial yearning inside her and in 1984 she jumped at the chance to buy a dry cleaning business in Tuskegee when the owner approached her. She bought the business but could not purchase the building so in 2000 she acquired a different property, renovated it and hung up a sign declaring the location - Loretta's University Cleaners. She respects and appreciates her customers, especially since catering to them has allowed her to provide jobs to a substantial number of college students. She says, I have just been overwhelmed by their eagerness to work and their work values. Many of them still come here during Homecoming to say hello and to thank me. The students often develop a love for this community but it is a two-way street. Many of my customers also fall in love with the students. They often give the students gifts—money, cards, letters of recommendation and contact information on alumni that could help the students after graduation.”

Loretta J. Alexander is among a tiny group of local business owners in Tuskegee. These entrepreneurs are facing a mountain of challenges involving unsteady profit margins and the struggle to stay open. In spite of the difficulties, Loretta has consistently offered a warm smile and excellent customer service. After 34 years in business, she is truly a pillar of endurance.

After serving one term as secretary of TACC, in 2017 she was elected president of the organization.