Jacksonville trailblazer tells story to alma mater

By Kate Howard

When Delores Brisbon attended South Jacksonville School No. 107, it was a place where black children used books cast off by the city’s white schools.

Decades later, she was the first black chief operating officer at a bastion of white privilege — an Ivy League medical school hospital.

Brisbon, now 77, returned Friday to share her story with the students of PS 107, now the nationally renowned Douglas Anderson School of the Arts magnet school.

Many students admitted they didn’t know the history of their school, and Brisbon, flanked by a group of alumni who came to hear her speak, made that history real.

Brisbon hoped she could serve as an inspiring real-life example of who a young black woman coming out of Jacksonville can become.

“I started in that very discriminatory environment of segregation, and for 28 years I led an all-white institution,” Brisbon said. “It’s all very unreal to me.”

Brisbon grew up in the Southside area and got much of her education in black-only institutions. She graduated from Stanton High School and went on to Tuskegee University, earning degrees in sociology and nursing. Her first historic moment came when she joined the staff of the University of Pennsylvania hospital in 1959 as its first black head nurse.

Her excitement was balanced with implicit racism, so different from the segregation of her youth. Instead of calling her names, doctors would simply pass her by, never believing she could be the one in charge.

She climbed the ladder nonetheless, making history at the institution with each step. Named chief operating officer in 1979, an achievement she now attributes to strong faith and a loner personality: She took the isolation and exclusion she faced and turned it inward to help her focus on her goals.

Now, active in leadership programs and finishing her memoir, she’s anxious to speak out about her legacy.

On Friday, Brisbon was peppered with questions from Douglas Anderson students.
Should we listen to our parents or our hearts when we pick a career? How do we stay focused in a world full of distractions? How have you handled it when you encountered racism?

Her answers all came back to her central message: Be yourself if you want to be successful. If you know who you are, there’s no limit to what you can accomplish.

“I like who I am,” she said. “I wouldn’t change anything, because I am who I am in part because of my struggles.”

Brisbon’s visit was part of the HistoryMakers program, a nationwide effort to raise awareness of the contributions of African-Americans and preserve their stories for future generations. She was one of 200 HistoryMakers nationwide to make a school visit on Friday. Many, like Brisbon, are attending a school they have a connection to.

“We hope for long-term affiliations and new resources for these schools,” said Julieanna Richardson, executive director of HistoryMakers. “We also want all people to see accomplished African-Americans who can broaden the definition instead of a few famous names.”

The HistoryMakers archive is full of interviews with some famous names — President Barack Obama, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and former Secretary of State Colin Powell among them. There are also dozens of stories of notable firsts for African-Americans, as well as farmers, civil rights advocates and professionals who document the real black American experience.

Those stories are what Richardson is fighting to preserve. And the schools program is meant to connect today’s youth of all races to the struggles of a past generation.

“We know it only takes one instance sometimes to influence the course of someone’s life,” Richardson said.

The message seemed to resonate Friday.

Na’Stassiya Jones, a 17-year-old senior, said it was inspirational as a young black woman to learn what Brisbon had accomplished in a white, male-dominated world.

“I see you don’t have to be another Martin Luther King or be on TV to do really powerful things,” Na’Stassiya said.

“It gives not just black people but all people the inspiration to follow their dreams,” said Jahaan Sweet, also 17.

After the assembly, both students waited to talk to Brisbon. They told her she’s forced them to realize there are no real boundaries — and no excuses.

Brisbon smiled.

“I hoped I would only get through to one student, but I know now I got through to at least two of them,” she said.

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