

in the spotlight: MILTON PITTS CRENCRAW

*"I imagine this country is the
greatest country God ever made."*

Photography by Michael Baxley

Friends and family hosted a 95th birthday celebration last month for Tuskegee Airman Milton Pitts Crenshaw at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center. After almost a century of community service, we wanted to share his legacy and personal insights.

Milton, born Jan. 13, 1919, is an original Tuskegee Airman. He was one of the first African-Americans, and the first from Arkansas, to be trained by the federal government as a civilian licensed pilot. He earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at the Tuskegee Institute in 1939. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, he joined the Civilian Pilot Training Program, sponsored by the Army Air Corps, becoming a flight instructor. After his Tuskegee tenure, he served as a flight instructor at several airbases. In 1947, he returned to Little Rock and implemented an aviation program at Philander Smith College, where he taught until 1953.

Who's been your greatest influence?

"My father put me on the bus to Tuskegee to pursue opportunities he didn't have. He was not a traveled man – when he spotted the Mississippi River on his first move to Arkansas, he was in awe of this great body of water God created."

His father, the Rev. Joseph C. Crenshaw, was a local civil rights leader with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was president of the Little Rock chapter during the Little Rock Central High School Crisis in '57. Inspired by Booker T. Washington, the first leader of the Tuskegee Institute, at the dedication of the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, he became determined to send his son to Tuskegee. Washington's dedication speech was given in 1913, six years before Milton was born.

How do you account for your remarkable work ethic?

"Life is real. You don't have control of where you go, you just go."

Throughout his aviation career, Milton practiced his second favorite job: teaching Sunday School. He recounts during the time he worked for Central Flying Services as a crop duster:

"I would wake up in the earliest morning hours, work at Central Flying Services and then teach Sunday School. I smelled like a boll weevil, but I did what I had to do. I always just did what I had to do."

What advice can you share with younger generations?

"Life is strange. You do the best you can. God has a plan. I happened to be put here to be a civilian flight instructor, and I did my best with dedication to God."

What lifts your spirits?

"I am an eternal optimistic. I was put here by God for a purpose, and I try to live for that purpose. You have to help people as you go along." 103

MAKING HISTORY

1998 – Induction to the Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame

2007 – Earns the Congressional Gold Medal by President George W. Bush

2007 – Induction to the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame

March 20, 2012 – Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola declares "Milton Pitts Crenshaw Day"