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RIVERTON
4TH OF JULY
2014



CELEBRATING OUR 117TH CHILDREN'S PARADE

2014 Parade Marshal

Helen Williams Jackson

Contributed by Casey L. Foedisch

It's not every day you get to meet a supermodel, let alone find one living in your own town, but here she is! Helen Williams Jackson was raised in East Riverton before her career took her halfway around the world, and after more than fifty years she came back home, bringing an incredible legacy with her.

Helen Jackson, then Williams, was born the youngest daughter of Ellis and Helen Williams, both from Merchantville. She and her older sister, Marietta, attended the Eleanor Philips School, a segregated grade school in East Riverton. After desegregation, both girls went to Palmyra High School, where Helen was a member of the Drum and Bugle Corp. During high school, she was working at a party when Burt Pagano, the owner of Pagano Studio in New York, noticed her. He told her to come up to New York when she graduated; there would be a job waiting for her there.



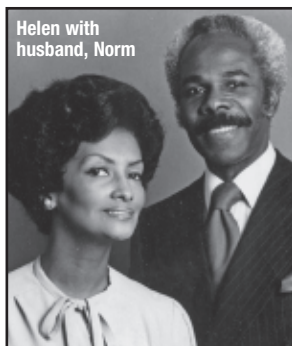
When Helen graduated from Palmyra High School in 1954, she headed right to Pagano Studio. There, she learned to be a fashion stylist, which involved dressing and doing the makeup of models. She organized spreads for the studio, but a photographer named Eric Nepo asked her if she wanted to try modeling. It took some convincing, but Helen finally agreed to be on the other side of the camera.

Any time Pagano Studio was contacted by magazines like Ebony, JET, or TAN, Helen was the model they used for the advertisements, and her face became more recognizable. But when she took her book of modeling pictures to Ilene Ford, the largest agency in New York, she was kept waiting for two hours and dismissed because of the color of her skin. Eventually, she signed with Grace DelMarco, the only African-American modeling agency at the time. The owner, Ophelia DeVore, helped Helen's career to finally take off!

DeVore said the only way for Helen to get the work she deserved was to go to Paris, where there were different attitudes about dark-skinned models. While in Paris, she modeled for the Christian Dior House of Fashion and the Cannes Film Festival, to name a few. The recognition she found in Paris came back to America and gave her much more opportunity, including a large campaign with Budweiser which Helen laughingly says "paid the rent." She made the cover of Ebony, was featured on a Duke Ellington record cover, and even appeared in an Italian movie, Venere Creola. The New York Times and Cosmopolitan published pictures of her that were controversial and groundbreaking, but Helen never let industry prejudices affect her. Instead, she respected people in spite of their treatment of her and never stopped trying to succeed. She was professional in spite of the inequality she faced, and she became the most photographed African-American model of the time.



At Palmyra High School



Helen with husband, Norm



At Cannes Film Festival

Helen retired from modeling in 1970 but didn't leave fashion; she returned to her earlier career as a fashion stylist. She styled her way around the country working for household names like JC Penney and Sears. There she met her great friend Henry Castro, a photographer, and they started their own company, H & H Fashions. She married Norm Jackson in 1977, a man she'd met years before while he was working at B. Altman's and Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. She teased him for his seriousness but with her bubbly, outgoing charm, she managed to win him over.

The newlyweds lived together in New York before home called to Helen and they moved back to Riverton, where they live today. She finally retired from styling two years ago when she was 76! She now devotes her time to sewing, her incredible oil paintings, and the beautiful garden she and Norm tend together, which has been featured on the Riverton Garden Tour.

Helen has received numerous awards for her contribution to fashion and modeling, one of which was given to her in 2004 from the Fashion Institute of Technology for Lifetime Achievement. No doubt she is incredibly deserving of that award, but her greatest triumph of all is the barrier she broke for African-American women everywhere. That achievement will last far longer than one lifetime.