

Metropolis

Mpls elder shares memories of Orangeburg Massacre

1968 shooting at SC protest sparked Rosa Bogar's mission to educate youth about Civil Rights Movement

By Felicia Shultz
Contributing Writer

Rosa Bogar has led her own personal crusade for quite some time now. The Minneapolis elder has lived in Minnesota since she was 26. Before moving here, Bogar was a resident of Syracuse, New York, for six years and, prior to that, she lived in her hometown of Orangeburg, South Carolina.

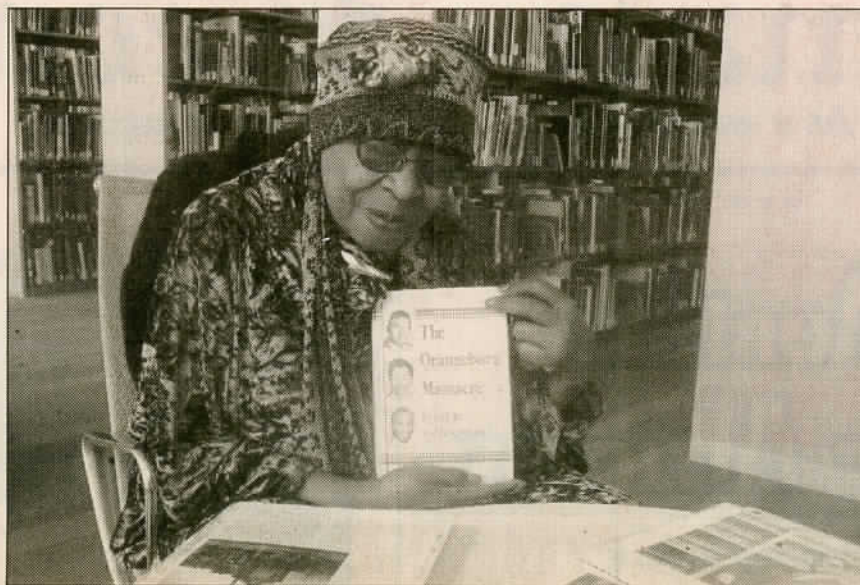
Most people haven't heard much of Orangeburg. It's a small town — not even seven square miles in proximity. It boasts about 14,000 residents and is located almost smack-dab in the middle of South Carolina. Orangeburg is also home to South Carolina State University, a historically Black college.

However, the town has a dark history that many people have kept silent for decades now — a secret that Rosa Bogar wants to share with the world.

The year was 1968. Several years had passed since Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, the landmark legislation that outlawed segregation in schools and public places. Enforcement of the law was weak initially, especially in the already segregated South.

There was a bowling alley near South Carolina State University, which was then called the All Star Triangle Bowl. Its owner at the time still segregated his business. He believed that as a privately owned business, he had the right to decide which customers he would allow and which he would exclude.

This prompted a protest on campus, which drew approximately 200 people. Several days went by as police officers reportedly tried to tame the crowd. On February 8, 1968, students lit a bonfire as a part of their protest. Police tried to extinguish the fire and shortly after, nine officers opened fire on the protestors. Law enforcement later claimed they thought students were shooting



Civil rights activist Rosa Bogar spends many days at the Minneapolis Central Public Library, as seen here, researching the Orangeburg Massacre and the civil rights era.

Photo by Felicia Shultz

at them, but the students asserted that these accusations were false.

Twenty-seven people were injured. Three others were killed.

"It was a massacre," said Rosa Bogar. "The gunmen were shooting to kill. They were using lethal bullets."

While Bogar was in Minneapolis at the time of the shootings, her two young boys were in Orangeburg. They were in preschool, under the care of family members, but very close in proximity to where the shootings took place.

"You can just imagine how frightened I was," said Bogar. "I was 1,000 miles away, and they were right there next to the killings."

Samuel Hammond, Jr., Delano Middleton and Henry Smith were the three victims who were killed that day in Orangeburg. Samuel and Henry were both students at the college. Delano was a high school student, waiting for his mother to get off of work, when he

was fatally struck.

Little media attention was given to the tragedy, leaving most of the nation uninformed of the Orangeburg Massacre. The nine officers who opened fire were acquitted. The FBI has talked about re-opening the case, although to date it still remains closed.

"It saddens me that there needs to be so much healing that needs to be done," Bogar lamented. However, she has found her own path to help heal her wounds of the tragedy that shook her hometown.

In 1997 Rosa spearheaded a reunion in Orangeburg, honoring the town and the victims of the massacre. It was the first time she had been back to Orangeburg in 35 years. She sent hundreds of fliers and made hundreds more phone calls to help reunite the broken community. During the ceremony, she also honored Delano Middleton, the high school student

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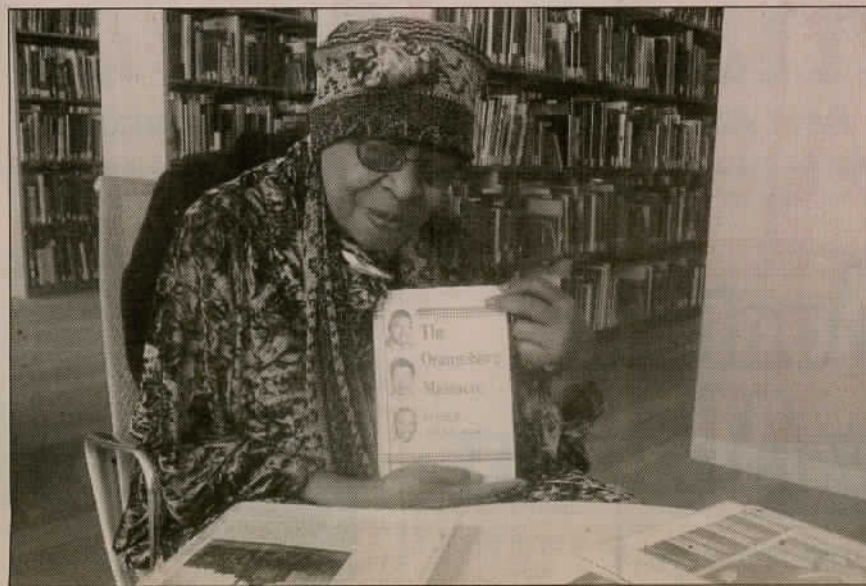
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who was killed, with a plaque.

"Delano was in my sister's high school class," said Bogar. "The entire event affected so much more than the three people who died. The whole town was affected."

The whole town, like the rest of the nation, was also deeply affected by the entire Civil Rights Movement. Rosa never had a White friend until she moved north. Her elementary, middle and high schools were all segregated. She wasn't allowed in the public library, and she clearly remembers while shopping at a store that she was welcome to spend as much money as she wanted, but not welcome to stay in the store to enjoy a cold beverage in the store's ice cream parlor.

"I remember when Woolworth's pulled out all of their sitting stools so Blacks couldn't sit down in the drug store to enjoy a snack or drink," she recalled.

Bogar remembers traveling back to South Carolina a few years after the Massacre via bus for her grandmother's funeral. Legally, segregation was over, but she was still scared to sit in a wrong section of the bus — afraid she'd be arrested and miss her grandmother's funeral: "I had to call my sister to ask her where the sign was for the Black section. She told me I could now sit anywhere on the bus. I was still so afraid, though, that I'd be in the wrong seat."

Today, the retired Minneapolis teaching assistant visits schools to share her anecdotes about the movement and the Orangeburg Massacre with young children.

In 1997, Bogar proposed to the mayor of Orangeburg to declare a Civil Rights Remembrance Day. He gladly accepted, and now that day is celebrated on May 4. But Bogar, true in character, thinks

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about civil rights more than just once a year.

"I don't just wait until Black History Month comes around to talk about Black history, just like I won't wait until May 4 to talk about the civil rights era. All of us need to embrace the entire movement — not just the end, which is

when the Orangeburg Massacre occurred."

Bogar looks to the future and plans someday to write a book of all her memories of Orangeburg and the movement. But in the meantime, she hopes Orangeburg citizens and law enforcement will open up about February 4, 1968 — a day more than 40 years ago that needs to be revisited so old wounds may finally heal.

Felicia Shultz welcomes reader responses to fjubratic@comcast.net.