

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Meet Mamie Kirkland, (almost) 105

By Deidre Williams
Sep 1, 2013



Mamie Kirkland, who turns 105 on Tuesday, celebrates her birthday Saturday with a party at Schiller Park Senior Center on Genesee Street.

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Less than 5 feet tall, Mamie Kirkland is tall in esteem and long in years.

The East Delavan Avenue resident has lived in Buffalo for 90 years, and on Saturday she celebrated her upcoming 105th birthday with a party in Schiller Park Senior Center on Genesee Street.

Decked out in a silver jacket, a silver-sequined hat and sparkly shoes for her birthday party, Kirkland greeted just about everyone who arrived with a hug and a kiss.

Set to turn 105 on Tuesday, Kirkland is still very sharp. She doesn't need a phone book or a computer. Her family's phone numbers are stored in her mind.

"At 105, she definitely demonstrates enthusiasm, spirit, joy of living," said Kirkland's oldest daughter, Juanita Hunter, professor emeritus at University at Buffalo's School of Nursing.

Mamie Kirkland – the matriarch of a five-generation family – was born in 1908 in Ellisville, Miss.

It was the same year that Mother's Day was observed for the first time and the first Gideon Bible was put into a hotel room. Orville Wright made the world's first flight lasting longer than one hour, and Puyi – the last emperor of China – ascended to the throne at age 2. Jack Johnson became the first African-American heavyweight boxing champion, and Henry Ford built the first Model T car, which sold for \$825.

And it all happened in her first year of life. Since then, she has journeyed through more than 10 decades and its many changes.

"She has seen so many transitions in the world: the end of the Jim Crow era, racism, her family chased by the Ku Klux Klan," said Mamie Kirkland's only living son, Tarabu, who lives in Los Angeles, where Mamie Kirkland spends the winter months.

One of her most vivid childhood memories is when her family narrowly escaped the Ku Klux Klan in the middle of the night, when Klan members went on midnight raids, randomly burning homes throughout segregated neighborhoods of East St. Louis, Mo., according to Hunter.

Kirkland's father was a minister.

"He came home one night and announced he had to go because the Klan was after him," said Kirkland, who was about 7 at the time.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," she added.

The family was gathered up, and they boarded a train to Alliance, Ohio, where they found refuge with relatives.

Even though the family had successfully escaped to Ohio, they hadn't left the racism behind, Tarabu said: Klansmen burned crosses on the front lawn of the family's home.

But there were some good memories of Ohio. It's where she met her future husband, Albert.

"He was a good-looking, tall man," said Kirkland, who was 15 when she and Albert got married.

It lasted for decades.

"35 years, three months and 16 days," she said.

Albert died in 1959, said Hunter, one of the couple's nine children.

Along with Hunter and Tarabu, daughters Jeanette Clinton, Margaret and Beatrice, who lives in California, are still alive.

In addition, Kirkland has 17 grandchildren, including former Buffalo Community Services Commissioner Donald O. Allen Sr.; 24 great-grandchildren; 70 great-great-grandchildren; and nine great-great-great-grandchildren.

In 1995, at age 87, Kirkland was named one of the “Magnificent Seven,” an award created by Coordinated Care to honor citizens throughout Western New York who exemplify successful aging.

As part of the recognition, she was featured in the company’s former publication, “Prime Time Seasoned Citizens.”

An active member of First Shiloh Baptist church for more than 70 years, she also is the congregation’s longest-standing member.

She credits her faith in God with sustaining her through the years.

“He’s been keeping me going,” she said.

State Sen. Timothy M. Kennedy, D-Buffalo, was on hand for the birthday party Saturday, and he presented her a proclamation designating Sept. 3, 2013, as Mamie Kirkland Day.

The Buffalo News: Meet Mamie Kirkland, (almost) 105 <https://bit.ly/BNMeetMamie>

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