Bertha Josephine Blue
By Debbi Snook

On a spring day in the early 1900s, a confident-looking woman ushers a group of schoolchildren along the hilly sidewalk in Cleveland's Little Italy neighborhood. She wears a crisp, blue dress and the scent of lavender soap.

The children, many of them sons and daughters of Sicilian immigrants, are walking to First Communion practice at Holy Rosary Church. The woman, their first-grade teacher, is African-American.

This snapshot in the rich and remarkable life of Bertha Josephine Blue, a member of Cleveland's early black middle class, also reaches across many generations of race relations in Cleveland.

By today's perceptions, Blue had quite the nerve. From 1903 to 1947 - a total of 44 years - this granddaughter of a slave taught at Murray Hill Elementary School.

Yes, in Little Italy, the tightly knit East Side Italian neighborhood of checkered tablecloth restaurants - and a checkered history dealing with outsiders.

But Blue used her determination, talent and heart to pierce this insulated community in such a way that it flooded her with love. It wasn't a strategy, but a calling.

You won't find Blue in most of Cleveland's history books, but more than a half-century after her retirement and death, the mention of her name still brought tender, childlike responses from older residents of Little Italy. Some of them, plus a new group of admirers, are dusting off the memory of this respectful interracial relationship and passing it to future generations. Maybe, just maybe, they hope, it will help erase a multitude of old wounds.

Blue's photograph graced the wall of the one-room Little Italy Historical Museum, the neighborhood's former showcase. The same shrine housed a hand-cranked pasta machine from the old country and samples of lace tatted by many ancestors. An ornately painted donkey cart from Italy rolled out the door for many annual Feast of the Assumption parades.

Also on the walls were images of people from Campobasso and Abruzzi in the central part of Italy, and Sicily in the south - people who escaped the economic limitations of their homeland. Many worked as stonemasons in a quarry nearby, or as gifted carvers for the ornate Lake View Cemetery bordering the neighborhood.

Blue taught their children. Then she stayed after school to teach English to their parents. In turn, they taught her Italian.

Jane Darr, Blue's daughter, said in a 2001 interview that her mother could relate to

the immigrants as outsiders.

"She'd say, 'Janie, they're so young and so far from home. I have to do this.' "

"She was beautiful. We all loved her," recalled Eva Maesta, a volunteer at the former museum and one of Blue's former students. "Every birthday, she got a little cupcake for you with a candle in it. And this is when you couldn't afford a cupcake."

"She believed everybody should get a passing grade," added Lauretta Nardolillo, another volunteer. "If you were a slow learner, she'd help you more. She never scolded you for getting things wrong."

"When my mother baked bread, she'd give her a loaf of it," remembered Frances LaRiche. Blue was allowed to park for free in the LaRiche family garage on Random Road. It was no small donation. The LaRiches couldn't afford a car of their own.

On the cold, sunny afternoon of her interview, Darr circled the old school by foot and recalled the annual inspection tour she and her mom did each year. Most summers, the neighborhood kids would break classroom windows. Darr and Blue would drive around the building before school started to see which windows got hit.

"Never hers," Darr said proudly.

Given the area's racially tense past, people might expect the opposite. Darr said the late Carl Stokes, Cleveland's first black mayor and the first black mayor of a major U.S. city, was astonished to hear about Blue for the first time at a Western Reserve Historical Society event in the early 1990s.

"He asked me if we tried to find out who 'sent her up the hill' and why – that it might not have been a joyful thing."

But it was.

Kenneth L. Kusmer's 1978 book, "A Ghetto Takes Shape, Black Cleveland, 1870-1930" shows there were four black Cleveland teachers in 1908 - a healthy representation compared to other cities of the time. By 1915, there were 30.

Cleveland had been part of the Western Reserve, claimed by Connecticut and settled by New Englanders. Many of them were evangelic and reform-minded Christians who made most of what is now Northeast Ohio a center of the abolitionist or anti-slavery movement.

Remarkably, their 18th-century traditions of equality, Kusmer wrote, "remained intact to a remarkable degree" through the turn of the 20th century. Some of Cleveland's first blacks found a more level playing field here than in many other cities.

The Great Migration changed things. The massive movement of Southern blacks heading north, escaping crop failures and old racism, magnified racial tension up north. Many were rural and uneducated, or seen as competition for jobs.

By the time Blue came of age, that tradition of equality did not include all professions. Because of her color, she probably would have been turned away from a medical school. But she was welcomed at a teacher's college. With a teaching certificate in hand, the city school system would be open to her, including schools in white neighborhoods.

All she had to do was get that certificate. Those who knew her never doubted she would.

Blue lived for many years in the Central neighborhood, one of several sections of the city where blacks settled. During World War I, as southern blacks moved in by the tens of thousands, it became Cleveland's version of New York's Harlem. Blacks went there because other areas, especially growing suburbs, were closed to them.

When Darr visited the old homestead on E. 90th Street, the sweet memories flowed. There were the blue hydrangeas that her grandmother, Cornelia Cunningham Blue, planted in the yard. There were neighbors who showed up just to see Blue's Asian décor, or her wall-sized bookcase.

It was a household of achievement.

"I grew up in a home where people always had a pencil and a legal pad," said Darr. "They wanted to open doors that had never been opened. They would say, 'This is the problem. How are we going to convince the community of such and such?'

"We were never allowed to use the terms 'white people' and 'colored people.' Grandma said it reinforced the battle. And you didn't sit around the table at night and talk about the race problem. Dinner was a time to be happy and relaxed. If you wanted to do something, you went out and joined an organization that worked toward a goal."

Darr recalled her mother and grandmother as serene personalities, and credits some of their talent for diplomacy from Quaker influence. She said Blue's grandparents traveled the Underground Railroad to a Quaker settlement of ex-slaves near Cadiz, three hours south of Cleveland near the Ohio River.

Darr remembered using the words "thee" and "thou" at home, another possible Quaker connection.

Blue was born in Cleveland into a supportive atmosphere. Her cousin, Welcome T. Blue, was one of the city's top black real estate salesmen with a big house one block

away on E. 89th St. Welcome taught Blue to drive - when other male cousins wouldn't, Darr said - and may have been a financial help.

As a young woman, Blue couldn't afford four years of college in a row. She did one year at Hiram College, 1899-1900, and took other classes at Miami University in Oxford. It was not until 1932 that she received a bachelor's degree from Western Reserve University. Darr said the graduation procession in front of the Cleveland Museum of Art was joyful.

"It was important to other people, too," she said, "this one brown face walking around the lagoon."

Blue's life was full. There were high teas every afternoon at home, football games at Central High (starring her famous place-kicking brother, Joe Blue), the Minerva Book Club, classes in calligraphy and folk-dancing.

Blue once took her daughter to a party where bandleader Noble Sissle (best man at Joe Blue's wedding) and pianist Eubie Blake played. There were annual trips to Oberlin to celebrate the end of slavery, and summer vacations at a tony black resort in Idlewild, Mich.

It was no spinster life. Blue once went to a show by fan dancer Sally Rand, "just to see how she got away with it." And although Blue was a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, she brewed up ginger beer that her relatives called potent.

The frivolity did not obscure the humble bones of her life. In addition to teaching, she organized a Sunday school at St. John AME Church on E. 40th Street. Churches were essential to black lives, with one historian calling them “the only institutions the negro could call his own.”

Blue also helped her friend, activist Jane Edna Hunter, manage the Phillis Wheatley Association, a groundbreaking community house for black women. It’s possible that Blue joined Hunter in battling the raging controversy surrounding the formation of the house.

Some upper class blacks felt integration was achievable if they worked hard and worked smart within the white community. On the other side, Hunter, a trained nurse, and others, couldn’t just watch as young black women were turned away from the whites-only YWCA. They knew help had to come from somewhere, even if it meant in a segregated institution. The settlement house emerged to change minds and lives.

Blue helped deliver babies in her family, and many friends and relatives came by the house just to unburden their hearts.

But Blue’s mother did not think her daughter's life was full in all ways. Two romances ended when one man died of pneumonia, another from tuberculosis. Cornelia felt Blue needed a child, and set out to find her one.

She did with Jane Lee Darr, a 2-year-old with pecan skin and blue eyes. Darr's mother, a friend of a friend, had just gotten divorced. She had no money and no future, and she looked white, which she was, mostly. She knew Blue could give the child a better life.

When the adoption was finalized, the parental rights went to Blue's mother. Then, when she died, the rights went to Blue, a rarity for a single working parent at the time.

Darr remembers feeling immediately comfortable with Blue, how Blue touched her small head to calm her, how the house felt immediately like a home. When Darr's birth mother came back to take her to Cumberland, Md., to see her dying birth grandmother, Blue gave the girl a small, blue bowl to take with her. "She said, 'You can rub it and you won't be far away from us.' "

Blue was never angry or out of control with her daughter.

"I was mischievous," said Darr. "I had to leave the table a couple times because you don't say 'ain't' or 'honeychile.' And I loved [saying] that.

"But my worst punishment was to go to my room and not eat family dinner. So then it would get late and maybe I'd get some soup and we'd have a talk. Nobody ever went to bed [hurt or angry]."

Hints of Blue's tenderness and her understanding of young people can be found among the items in her manuscript file at the Western Reserve Historical Society. There are references to her favorite books on teaching, which stress the individualism of children. And there are dozens of thank-you notes from former students, filling the file with greeting cards of violets and lilies of the valley.

Schools were changing when Blue retired in 1947. At that time, Kusmer noted in his book, "A Ghetto Takes Shape," there was a trend toward segregating black teachers with black students.

The Civil Rights movement confronted that issue and many others in the 1960s. Blacks not only had the vote, they used it to right longstanding wrongs.

In 1963, the year Blue died, city schools were overcrowded. Black students were sent to Murray Hill, but kept in classrooms apart from white Little Italy students.

A sidewalk protest against the in-school segregation was readied one day in 1964, but never launched. Still, a white mob of 1,500 gathered and, according to news

accounts, attacked photographers and black citizens who happened to be driving through the neighborhood.

Tension lingered for decades. Blacks complained of discrimination and other mistreatment in restaurants and on the street. Neighborhood residents chafed at visitors or student residents who were too loud, disrespectful or parked in the wrong places.

In the 1990s, officials of Case Western Reserve University and Little Italy started meeting to deal with the problems. Reported racial incidents became scarce.

While some blacks were still not comfortable in the neighborhood, many more began using it.

Then the Little Italy Historical Museum published a history book. It was dedicated to three people: two of the neighborhood's founding fathers and Bertha Josephine Blue.

"She was the first one we thought of," said museum volunteer Nardolillo. "She was one of us. Everybody liked her so much and she was such a lovely, dedicated teacher, we felt she should get some recognition."

Nardolillo said she also hoped it served as a gesture of reconciliation.

Sandra Malek Vodanoff, a historical society volunteer and Lake View Cemetery docent, got a plaque installed at Blue's gravesite there, telling how much she was loved by the Italian-American community. Teachers of English as a second language helped in the effort.

Thelma Pierce, who processed Blue's file at the historical society, and whose father-in-law, David H., was the first white president of the Cleveland NAACP, said Blue was an exception in Little Italy, but exceptions can light the way to better times.

"It's good if people can say, 'I love Bertha Blue. That must mean there are other African-Americans I can love, too,' " said Pierce.

And when that feeling is returned by blacks, Darr said, her family had a name ready for it: “The Feast of Forgiveness.”