



Walteen Whitfield: What's My Story

Lifelong Harlem resident Walteen Whitfield joined the Abyssinian Baptist Church in 1989. She can still remember one particular sermon Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III preached: "What Would My Church Be, If Every Member Thought Like Me". Walteen says "Well, I was so inspired by that sermon, I decided to join ministries and dedicate my life to the Abyssinian Baptist Church. At first, I joined the Wednesday Night Ushers. We held a prayer service in the Vestry then and would also usher each 4th Sunday."

Walteen went on to become President of that board, which later became the True Spirit Usher Board. Her distinguished service that followed is inspiring: Membership on the Scholarship Committee, Chairperson of the Cotillion Committee and Co-Chair of the Women's Day committee. While reminiscing about her service to the church, Walteen said, "Remember the \$2.00 Patron's Memorial? Well back then each ministry had a day in the kitchen, which Deacon Allen Mintz ran. Collard greens and chicken had to be cleaned each Sunday."

Walteen remembers growing up in Harlem and the first year of open enrollment in NYC, which allowed her to attend JHS 117 and then graduate from William Howard Taft High School. During her early years, she became a Debutant, coming out at the New York Statler Hilton Hotel. That experience came in handy when she worked with young ladies preparing them to become Debutants during her service on Abyssinian's Cotillion Committee.

Walteen worked for the telephone company and then Western Union from 1968 to 1992, when that company made massive layoffs. It was at the unemployment office where Walteen used her ingenuity and self-worth to get her next job. The unemployment clerk would often ask "Have you been looking for work?" Walteen responded with "How did you get this job?" The answer to that question led to Walteen working at the New York State Insurance Fund, two weeks after asking the question.

After 32 years and several promotions at the Insurance Fund, Walteen retired in 2004. Rev. Butts attended her retirement party and asked her to work in the stewardship department at Abyssinian, which she did for the next 20 years! In addition to making sure the end of the year statements went out, she coordinated church trips to the National Baptist Convention from 2005-2019, making plane, hotel and restaurant reservations for church members and Harlem residents attending the conventions in cities like Birmingham, New Orleans, Atlanta, Orlando and Denver.

Waltine says “Reverend Butts, I believe, knew I could organize...he saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself, and I had his trust”. It was that trust that led Reverend Butts to choose Walteen to coordinate the church’s pilgrimage to the Motherland, Africa. He instructed her to first visit Ethiopia, secure a capable Ethiopian travel guide and begin the arduous task of transporting a group of 162 people, including church and community members and the Chancel Choir. The pilgrimage included visits to several regions of Ethiopia. Waltine remembers, “of the many highlights of this historical visit, the dinner at the Ethiopian Palace stood out. We each practically had our own waiter.” She also said “Rev. Butts made the decision to honor Haile Selassie, the late Emperor of the Kingdom formerly known as Abyssinia, with a commemorative plaque at his burial site. “

Here is the itinerary for that historic visit:

During both her long professional career and service to Abyssinian, Waltine raised one daughter, Doris Davis. Finally, she says “Abyssinian was a blessing in my life, all of the things which were afforded me”.

That is Walteen Whitfield, and This Is Her Story.