

# A story of American courage

Former Springfield College President and UMass-Amherst Chancellor Randolph W. Bromery, 78, was asked by the Republican's Newspaper in Education program to share his story of growing up during the 1930s in Maryland as part of the paper's "Exploring Black History" series.

By **RANDOLPH W. BROMERY**

I was born in a small house on Carroll Street in Cumberland, Md., on what I am told was a very cold day in January 1926 and was the second child born to my parents. My sister was born less than a year earlier.

Our house consisted of two stories, a front porch, living room, dining room, kitchen with a side porch and a small bathroom and pantry on the first level and three bedrooms on the second level. Since the house was one room wide, it required a person to pass from one room to the other to reach an adjacent room.

A coal-fired stove in the dining room heated the living and dining rooms and also heated two of the upstairs bedrooms through a floor grate. A wood-burning cook stove in the kitchen heated the kitchen and the bedroom on the floor above the kitchen. Each morning, I was required to be the first to arise and to stoke the coal stove in the dining room and to build the wood fire in the kitchen stove.

Our street was in a very quiet residential neighborhood, mostly white middle class. My paternal great-grandparents, whose house was across the street from ours, constituted the only other black family on the street. The next street over was Wallace and consisted of several black families, including my high school English teacher, Miss Ruth Franklin. Two other black families lived on the cross street that connected Carroll with Wallace Street.

## *A segregated existence*

These several black families comprised one of the two small enclaves of black families located on the west side of Cumberland. The second black family enclave was located on and near a small section of Green Street that was approximately six blocks from Carroll. Most of these families were named "Cooper" or "Gilmore" and were the focus of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s book, "Colored People."

The larger majority of the black population lived in two enclaves in the eastern part of Cumberland. This was on the other side of two railroad tracks

from us and was the location of the "colored school" we were required to attend.

Everything in Cumberland was segregated both by law and by custom. My recollection of the only nonsegregated city service was riding on the city buses. We rode on the buses very infrequently since it was an extra expense item for the family. We walked to every place in the city that we wished to visit.

The two- to three-mile walk each morning through sunshine, snow, rain and the cold from the west side of the city to our school on the east side was made more difficult by the frequent verbal harassment from the white students who were bused or who walked to the white-only elementary and high schools located near our homes on the west side. Our metal lunch boxes were our best defensive arms against the

very infrequent physical contact with the white students. The white students were not similarly armed since the white schools had cafeterias and the "colored schools" did not. Although we were not provided with bus transportation to school, black high school students living in West Virginia were

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bused across the state line to our school in Cumberland. This was done to accommodate the State of West Virginia so that the state would not have to build a separate and equal school for the few black students living in that part of West Virginia across the state line from Maryland.

Our house was populated with my paternal grandparents, my mother and father and my sister and two brothers. My grandmother, whom we referred to as "Nana," was the dominant person in the house. She was well-educated and ambidextrous. She could write equally well with both hands and readily showed she was taught penmanship using the Palmer method, which was the penmanship method we were taught at our school.

My mother was a very quiet and gentle person. However, she would very clearly state her position on family issues of importance to her. I never saw any form of disagreement, verbal or otherwise, between my father and mother. There was a deep and abiding love and respect for each other. My father was a normally very quiet man who worked extremely hard both day and night to provide for his family. At the same time, he struggled to maintain some modicum of personal dignity and respect in a society that was constantly attempting to keep him in his "place."

### *Condescending whites*

Surprisingly, the local racists had the least impact on my father. Legal segregation was well marked, clear and simple. It was coping with the so-called "liberal" white population in town and the condescending and patronizing attitudes they displayed toward my father and other similarly situated black men that significantly impacted my father. As a young teen-ager, it nearly drove me to the brink of insanity when I witnessed those frequent patronizing and condescending verbal exchanges between my father and his so-called white liberal employers or other white residents. My father even referred to the very young white chil-

dren accompanying these people as

"Miss Caroline" or "Mr. Charles."

There were times when my father was obviously embarrassed that I was with him during these encounters. He would remove his hat in their presence, turn his glance downward and intersperse his brief responses with an artificial chuckle or laughing sound. Most of the times I would turn and walk away to save him from the embarrassment and also to maintain my sanity. I have come to characterize these encounters as repeated violations of my father as a man. Even more tragically the violators were most likely not even aware of their arrogant attitude and despicable behavior. It was normal conduct for discourse between black and white people at that time.

My paternal grandfather was seen only on rare occasions since he traveled a lot as a Pullman car porter on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. When he was at home, he spent much of his time in his room upstairs reading the newspapers.

Both my mother and father were high-school educated, and much later I became aware that my mother had attended a teacher college for a couple of years. My father worked as a waiter at a local hotel until the mid-1930s. My grandmother ran a small part-time food catering service from the house with help from my mother.

Discipline was quite strict in our home and punishment, though frequent, was never cruel. My paternal great-grandmother, Nana's mother, lived on the east side of town. We visited with her frequently. Nana was a superb cook, and when I showed an early interest in cooking, she started teaching me when I was 5. At the beginning, we had a wood-fired cook stove. Nana taught me how to build the fire, cook cream sauces using asbestos pads to moderate the heat beneath the sauces, and to bake rolls, loaf breads, cakes and pies.

My favorites to make were chicken salad with a homemade salad dressing and stewed chicken with extremely light and fluffy dumplings. Our mutual love for cooking brought Nana and I very close together. While cooking, Nana constantly admonished me to truly know and be comfortable with myself as a person, a human being and an individual. Also, she urged me to constantly keep moving forward and progressing upward as life unfolds. These critically important messages have remained with me and have motivated me throughout my life. This very special relationship lasted until her death at the age of 101 years.

My mother died at the age of 43. This was a year after my discharge from World War II military service and less than a year before my marriage to my wife, Cecile. My father died in 1974, two months following his attendance at my daughter Carol's wedding. He was 74 at the time and I was chancellor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The "colored school" that I attended with my sister and brother went from the first to the 12th grade in an old dilapidated building and in fact did not have enough space for the 12 grades. Therefore, the school district arbitrarily eliminated the eighth grade. The black students would then pass from the seventh grade to the ninth grade. When my grandmother and other parents complained to the school board, they were informed that 11 grades were sufficient education for the "colored students."

In addition, the girls had a different curriculum from the boys. For example, my sister took mathematics in high school while the boys took manual arts courses. Again, my grandmother and others complained to the school board and were rebuffed. My grandmother then quickly made arrangements for me to take the requisite mathematics courses in the evenings at the home of our high school teacher, who was quite willing to take on this additional task. This, combined with the excellent teaching and dedication of our elementary and high school teachers, especially our superb English teacher, Miss Ruth Franklin, provided me with a relatively solid

educational background.

Since it was not formally shown on my high school transcript, I was tested in the military to determine my aptitude in mathematics and, as a result, I was certified for flight training. Ironically, following similar testing in college for my aptitude in mathematics, I was permitted to enroll and complete my undergraduate degree with a major in mathematics.

Although we attended church each Sunday with our family, and religion was important, it was not a dominant issue in our home. I played no sports in high school and much of any spare time was spent with several household chores and mowing neighborhood lawns or shoveling snow from sidewalks at 25 cents per hour. My sister, brother, mother and I spent enjoyable times playing board and card games. Most of my early life revolved around the home, and my early role models were my parents and grandparents.

Later in school, I studied "Negro History" and became acquainted with the accomplishments of such men as the scientist George Washington Carver and historian W. E. B. Dubois, the first black man to receive a doctorate from Harvard.

At that young age, I did not have a specific goal for my life. However, I did not want to be a janitor. I had watched my father — his face bathed in perspiration, large blotches of sweat ever expanding in widening circles on his blue denim shirt, dressed in ill-fitting

pants and old shoes that had been half-sold several times, as he struggled with the firing of coal furnaces and the mopping of floors at the city public library. I was especially negatively impacted by his daily encounters with both racists and, more so, by those unfortunate conversations he would have with his employers. I was both enraged and frustrated with this treatment of my father and will most likely reach the end of my life still struggling with those painful and tragic visions.

### *Shame and love*

Following those encounters where I was present, my father and I would walk home together in agonizing and deafening silence. At the age of 13 or 14, it was not possible for me to discuss those encounters with my father. Those experiences with my father endowed me with an unyielding and uncompromising demand to be treated with respect and dignity. I do not know how my father tenaciously managed to maintain his own dignity, self-respect and sanity in that frightening environment. However, it will live forever in my memory and is both the greatest legacy and saddest memory he has left with me. I believe that he survived by assuming two very different personalities, one for his family and close friends and the other for the white general public and his employers.

On weekends, my father assumed another personality. He was a jazz musician and played trumpet with a local jazz band.

Since he could read music, he would write the musical arrangements for the band. He taught my sister and I to read music. My sister played the piano and I played the alto saxophone.

However, I also did not want to spend my life as a jazz musician although I was raised listening to the 78 rpm records of Jimmy Lunceford, Coleman Hawkins, Don Redmond, Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller and Bessie Smith, and was well acquainted with Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. I never thought that some three to four decades later in my life I would meet Eubie Blake in person while serving as chancellor at the University of Massachusetts.

My early glimpses of the world beyond Cumberland came primarily from reading the numerous books which were required reading in high school and those provided to me by my mother and Nana. When very young we were read to at home and later encouraged to read by our parents. Since my father was the janitor in the local county library, I would read the books in the library when it was closed on Sundays and my father was at work. I listened avidly to the news on the radio and read the local newspaper. I spent many moments in my childhood quietly listening to my parents' conversations regarding current local and national events. I especially listened intently to a tall, neatly dressed black woman who would visit frequently with

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my grandmother. She would sit on the side porch, my grandmother would be in the kitchen cooking or washing clothes, and she and "Miss B" would discuss everything from the local gossip to world events. Even though at the appropriate times in the conversation code words were used, I fully comprehended what was taking place.

When my sister and I graduated from high school six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, my father told us that he could not afford to send both of us to college. My sister went to the colored state teacher college and I left Cumberland for Detroit, Mich., to seek employment. I had attended a National Youth Administration shop where I learned to use a metal turning lathe, producing firing pins with micrometer accuracy. I thought that Detroit would offer me a better opportunity to gain employment in a skilled trade. I stayed with my great uncle, who owned and managed a couple of parking lots located in the Polish populated industrial part of the city.

### Employment search

My great uncle and his family lived in a very nice house in an upscale neighborhood of Detroit and he drove a new, light blue Lincoln Zephyr with lots of chrome and full width, white sidewall tires. Gaining employment in the skilled trades was not possible since the trade unions unabashedly controlled entry by race.

I secured a job as a helper with a crew that was installing fluorescent lights in one of the Ford Motor Co. plants. It did not pay much; however, it provided me with enough funds to pay rent and food expenses to my great uncle. A few months later,

I joined the U.S. Army Air Corps and was called to active duty. The first real challenge in my life that I faced alone was when I arrived at the racially segregated Tuskegee Army Air Force Base located in south-central Alabama to begin flight training during World War II, still at a very young age. There are at least a dozen or more books written by Tuskegee airmen describing the military life and training at Tuskegee and all experiences are similar.

It was mostly a very positive experience for me with a generous number of negative race-based incidents that occurred both on and off the military base. South-central Alabama was not a very hospitable place for black men in or out of the military.

When I was discharged from the military, I returned briefly to Cumberland and then to Detroit. With the GI Bill in hand, I applied for admission to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. I was informed that without any high school mathematics courses, I could not be admitted. I went to the campus and requested to be tested in mathematics. I was surprised when the admissions officer allowed me to take the entrance tests in mathematics. My informal classes in mathematics at the home of my high school teacher enabled me to pass the entrance exams in high-school level mathematics. I was then enrolled at the University of Michigan as a freshman with a major in mathematics.

In the summer of 1946, my father informed me that my mother's health was rapidly failing. I then left Ann Arbor and enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., for summer school to be closer to my home in Cumberland. I quickly discovered that I was now studying mathematics under such academic giants as Elbert F. Cox, the first African-American to receive a doctorate in mathematics (Cornell University) in the United States; David Blackwell, a superb mathematician who is among the very few African Americans elected to the National Academy of Sciences; and, in addition, I was most fortunate to spend a fantastic year studying philosophy under the brilliant Alain Locke.

Two incidents caused me to remain at Howard University beyond summer school. I met my wife Cecile during the summer of 1946 and my mother's death from a muscle degenerating disease did not occur until March 1947. After the death of my mother, I remained at Howard University and Cecile and I were married at the Little Chapel on the Howard campus three months later. We both were scheduled to graduate in the summer of 1948. We had secured a third-floor walk-up near the Union Station near Second and "C" Streets, Northeast, Washington, D.C., in the home of a black preacher and his wife.

My graduation was delayed because I was wrongly advised at Howard that my military service would be accepted in lieu of the physical education requirement. After considerable effort and much frustration, I was later allowed to substitute a one-year course in English literature for my missing physical education courses. Again, I was fortunate to study under another academic giant, Sterling Brown, who was also a dedicated jazz lover with an extensive collection of 78 rpm jazz records and tapes.

Following graduation, I began my search for employment in the field of mathematics. Since my primary interest was in geometry, I applied for a position at the U. S. Naval Research Laboratory located in southeast Washington. I was interviewed by a physicist who was doing radar antennae design, and based on my advanced courses in geometry, he said that he was very interested in hiring me and would send my application to the personnel office.

After being informed three times over the next two to three weeks that my employment application had been misplaced, I knew that my race was a factor. I then began looking at other government agencies for openings in

ever, my wife and I were rapidly running out of funds, so in desperation I returned to the U. S. Naval Research Laboratory to resubmit my employment application.

I vividly remember we had only \$7 remaining. Our landlord's wife had been leaving bags of groceries on the steps to our third-floor apartment, and had generously agreed to wait for their back rent.

After resubmitting my application for the fourth time, I boarded a trolley car to return home to search at other government agencies for openings. As I sat down in the mostly empty trolley car, without thinking, I picked up some pages from the Washington Afro-American Newspaper that was on the seat next to me. As I scanned the pages of the newspaper, an article caught my eye. The article stated that the U. S. Geological Survey was hiring mathematicians, physicists and geologists. The article further gave the address of the employment office. I then went directly to the office and was met with a very pleasant and outgoing woman who inquired as to my background and experience. She informed me that the U. S. Geological Survey was building a capability to conduct mineral exploration from a low-flying aircraft. Although I had no courses or experience in geology, she assured me that my training in mathematics and physics would be useful in conducting the scientific work and my flying experience in the military indicated that I would not be prone to air sickness.

### ***A new career***

It appeared that for the first time, my race was not a factor for her, and my employment application was expedited. I began work the next day with the Airborne Geophysics Section of the Geophysics Branch of the U. S. Geological Survey. What a contrast with my U. S. Naval Research experience. I spent the next 20 years with this organization, returning to school for six years part-time to secure my undergraduate courses in geology and to enroll in a master's program in geology at the American University in Washington, D.C.

Following receipt of my master's degree, I applied and was accepted at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to study for my doctoral degree under two other international academic giants, professors Ernst Cloos and Francis Pettijohn.

Following receipt of my doctorate, in 1967 I accepted a position as an associate professor to teach geophysics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I was soon appointed chair of the Department of Geology and Geography and professor of geophysics. When UMass expanded to three campuses, I was asked by the chancellor to serve as the first campus vice chancellor for student affairs.

### ***Heading UMass***

A few months later, when the chancellor abruptly resigned in the fall of 1971, the university president asked that I serve as acting chancellor of the Amherst campus. In April of 1972, I was appointed by the university's Board of Trustees to serve as chancellor of the Amherst campus.

While serving as chancellor, several colleagues and I acquired the extensive collection of the papers and memorabilia of W. E. B. Dubois and the papers of educator Horace Mann Bond. I also personally secured from London an original copy of the poems of Phillis Wheatley published in 1776.

(Wheatley, one of America's first published poets, was kidnapped from West Africa and sold to a Boston family who educated her and eventually emancipated her. During the 1770s, she traveled to London to promote her book of poetry called "Poems on Various Subjects.")

All of these materials now reside in the W. E. B. Dubois Library located on the UMass-Amherst campus.

I served as chancellor and executive vice president until September 1979 when I then returned to teaching and research in geophysics and geology at UMass.

A few years later, at my request, I was placed on leave to serve for a couple of years as interim president of Westfield State College while the college searched for a permanent president.

Following my tenure at Westfield, I was asked by former Sen. Paul Tsongas, who was then serving as chairman of the Board of Regents for Higher Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, to serve as chancellor of the board of regents office during the last year of the term of Gov. Michael S. Dukakis and the beginning few months of the term for Gov. William F. Weld.

I was unhappy not being on a campus and this combined unhappiness and my constant disagreements with Governor Weld's staff on public higher education policy led me to resign as chancellor in mid-1991 and return to teaching and research at UMass.

### ***Springfield College beckons***

In late 1992, I was asked by the board of trustees of Springfield College to serve as interim president of Springfield College. The managing of a private college and the distinguished reputation of Springfield College presented a challenge for me and thus I accepted.

In mid-1993, after serving as acting president, I was appointed president of Springfield College and spent the next six years working with the administration, faculty and trustees to bring Springfield College into the 21st century with improved academic quality and sound financial management. I resigned as president of Springfield College in 1999.

My next challenging and rewarding professional experience occurred in the fall of 2002, when I was contacted by several indi-

viduals in the public higher education sector of Massachusetts and the board of trustees of Roxbury Community College and its external search firm to accept the appointment as interim president of a troubled Roxbury Community College in the Roxbury section of Boston.

Although many of my friends and colleagues suggested that I thoughtfully and gracefully remain in retirement, I was deeply concerned because I knew of the critical importance of this unique institution to the population it was specifically designed to serve.

Following many discussions with my wife and family and considerable personal and professional reflection, I came out of retirement at the age of 76 years and I offered my candidacy as interim president.

Since at that time I was also challenged by my then seven-year long struggle with prostate cancer, I agreed to be appointed for a one-year term as president of Roxbury Community College. Members of the college and surrounding community became re-engaged and together we changed course, recruiting a number of the new professional staff.

I left the presidency of Roxbury Community College in early 2003.

I currently think that I am finally retired, however, I still perk up when the telephone rings at home and, when I go to answer, my wife Cecile admonishes me to "just say no."

While serving in these varied academic administrative positions, I also served as a member of several corporate boards of directors: Exxon Corp., The Singer Co., Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co., New England Telephone Co., NYNEX Corp., The John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Co., Chemical Bank, and Chase Manhattan Bank.

I served briefly as president of Weston Geophysical International and as president of my own geological/geophysical consulting company, Geosciences Engineering Corporation.

Most of my consulting work focused on exploring for potential mineral deposits along the west coast of Africa, extending from Senegal to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon.

I would then fly to Kinshasa, Zaire, and then to Sudan, Ethiopia and into Egypt where my wife, Cecile, my two younger sons, David, Christopher and I met Shirley Dubois, the widow of W. E. B. Dubois.

I served on the board of trustees at Mount Holyoke College and continue to serve on the board of trustees of Johns Hopkins University and the Corporation of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

## Achievement recognized

I was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award from Howard University and Johns Hopkins University. I was awarded an honorary doctorate from Johns Hopkins and eight other universities worldwide, including Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan.

I visited South Africa prior to the end of apartheid with a small group from the World Peace Foundation to explore various forms of governance. I also was a special guest of the Presidents of Malawi and Cameroon.

I served as the first African-American president of The Geological Society of America and was named as a Distinguished Afro-American Scientist by The National Academy of Sciences and my picture was hung at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D. C.

With personal perseverance and tenacity, the support and assistance of my parents, my wife and family, my high school teachers, and many other individuals and organizations, I have managed to overcome many past obstacles and setbacks.

I have witnessed significant advancements for my race and improved race relations in this country. However, we still continue to struggle with being respected for who we are as American citizens and as human beings.

Even now at the age of 78 years, with an earned doctorate and nine honorary degrees from colleges and universities around the world, my broad worldwide personal experiences and extensive 55-year professional history, many of my white colleagues still often suggest that I should forget the past and be more appreciative of what this country has done for me or permitted me to do for myself.

Yet, each and every day, I still see my father, his face and shirt bathed in perspiration, being talked down to during a trivial or juvenile level conversation by his so-called liberal, benevolent, white employers. I am destined to carry for the balance of my life on this earth, a sense of deep personal guilt for being unable or helpless to speak up for my father.

I also carry this guilt alone since none of my family, brother, sister, mother or grandmother, ever saw or did I discuss with them what I saw and experienced during those encounters. I had no other person with whom I could even discuss these occurrences. I remain alone with my agonizing reflections, my sense of personal guilt.

## Freedom's obligation

Today, more than six decades later, I am unable to erase these visions or expiate this sense of guilt. Dr. W. E. B. Dubois in 1913 said the following: "I am by birth and law afree black American citizen. As such I have both rights and duties. If I neglect my duties my rights are always in danger. If I do not maintain my rights I cannot perform my duties. I will listen, therefore, neither to the fool who make me neglect the things I ought to do, nor to the rascal who advises me to forget the opportunities which my children and I ought to have, and must have, and will have. Boldly and without flinching, I will face the hard fact that in this, my fatherland, I must expect insult and discriminations from persons who call themselves philanthropists and Christians and gentlemen. I do not wish to meet this despicable attitude by blows; sometimes I cannot even protest by words; but may God forget me and mine if in time or eternity I ever weakly admit to myself or the world that wrong is not wrong, that insult is not insult, or that color discrimination is anything but an inhuman and damnable shame."

My children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were all born free in this country, and to my last breath I will fight by any and all means to guard that freedom for them and to protect them from the indigni-

ties and disrespect agonizingly suffered by my father and witnessed by me, his son, who deeply loved and respected him both as a father and as a free black American citizen. This was the fundamental issue that W. E. B. Dubois stated that our nation must face in order to address the "problem of the color line" now in the 21st century.

We as free black American citizens must continue to demand both physical and psychological freedom in order to be truly free in this country and in the world.

Today, we spend much of our time discussing our physical freedoms gained through the enactment of new laws, new paradigms and new programs, such as the emancipation from slavery, acquisition of voting rights, implementation of affirmative action programs and the enactment of equal accommodations laws.

These are without question critically important social responses in our racial quest for freedom. However, we do not spend nearly enough time engaged in discussing and understanding the more challenging, difficult and complex philosophical concept of freedom. How can we continue to seek "freedom" if the vast majority of people of all races in the nation do not fully understand the full and true meaning of "freedom" and the inherent rights and obligations of "freedom" prescribed for us in the U. S. Constitution and guaranteed to all citizens under The Bill of Rights. The Rev. Martin Luther King said, "I have been to the top of the mountain and I have seen the other side."

After nearly eight decades of "living in America," I too have been to the top of the mountain and I have seen the other side. Hopefully, if my personal guilt diminishes, and if in these United States of America the potential rewards of American Democracy are routinely acquired at birth by all of its citizens, the view on the other side may appear even more promising for me. However, I cannot and we must not ever forget the physical and mental suffering and the indignities experienced by our pioneering ancestors. No amount or form of compensation can mitigate or satisfy that eternal debt owed to our ancestors by this country.

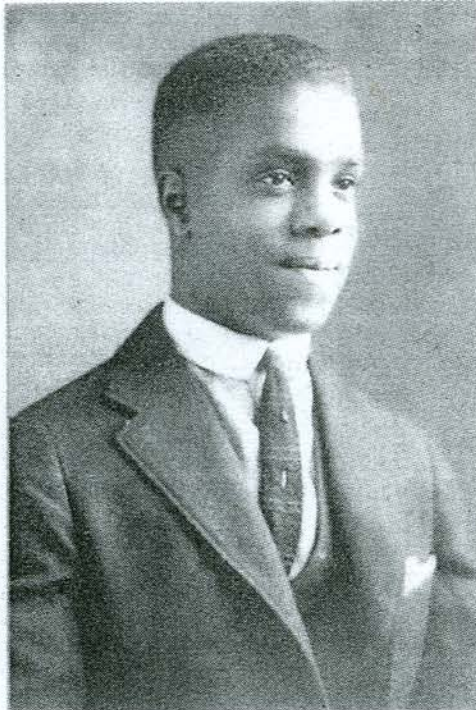


Randolph W. Bromery  
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# Success is sweet but oppression cannot be forgotten

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# Educated to overcome racial barriers



Lawrence Randolph Bromery  
about 1921  
Father of Randolph Bromery

***"I do not know how my father tenaciously managed to maintain his own dignity, self-respect and sanity in that frightening environment."***

**— R.W. Bromery**

***"My mother was a very quiet and gentle person. However, she would very clearly state her position on family issues of importance to her."***

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Edith Edmondsen Bromery  
about 1922  
Mother of Randolph Bromery