



Mr. Oral Winston Edwards

November 25, 1929 - September 29, 2017

Oral Winston Edwards, 87 of Forrest City, Arkansas, passed away September 29, 2017. He was born November 25, 1929, to Jesse and Grace Ahlf Edwards near Rector, Arkansas.

He was preceded in death by his loving wife of 50 years, Christine Austin Edwards. He was also preceded in death by his parents; two brothers – Leslie Edwards of Memphis, Tennessee, Robert (Bobby) Edwards of Marianna, Arkansas; two sisters – Ernestine McCartney and Cleatis Bowman, both of Las Vegas, Nevada; and a loving brother-in-law and sister-in-law Ben and Katherine Hickey of Forrest City. He is survived by one sister Marie Legault of Richardson, Texas.

He is also survived by one son – Steve Edwards and wife Laura of Marianna, Arkansas, and one daughter – Susan DeRossitt and husband Jim of Forrest City. Loving grandchildren – Ashley Rowton and husband Paul of Harrisburg, Arkansas, Leigh Nance and husband Coe of Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Steve Edwards, Jr. of Marianna, Arkansas. Frank DeRossitt and wife Beth of Bentonville, Arkansas, and John DeRossitt of Orlando, Florida. Papa also leaves great grandsons – J.P. Rowton, William Rowton, James Nance, Ben DeRossitt and Wyatt DeRossitt.

Oral was a self-made man. Born to humble beginnings in the Hopewell community outside Rector, Arkansas, his father was a barber and the entire family worked their 40 acre farm to provide a living. His family had lived in a big tent while they built their home. It was constructed by family members with the help of neighbors. Oral was born at home just after the new home was completed. Both of his grandmothers were present for the birth. Oral attended a two room schoolhouse in the Hopewell community until 8th grade. He then attended and graduated from Rector High School, walking four miles to school. Shortly after graduating high school he moved to Blytheville, Arkansas, where he took a job as an accounting clerk at Arkansas-Missouri Power Company. He also took a part time job on Saturdays working for Hays Store in Blytheville. It was there that he met the love of his life, Christine Austin. She was a bank cashier and worked a second job on Saturdays at Hays Store. Christine had also come from humble beginnings. She was raised in Blytheville. Her father worked for Bush's Canning

Company and sharecropped 40 acres. The similarities of their upbringings made them appreciate the finer things in life while understanding the challenges of the working family.

It was also at Hays Store that Oral learned to appreciate and enjoy the grocery business. In 1958, he took a job as assistant manager in a Liberty Cash Supermarket in Millington, Tennessee. After spending nearly two years there he was offered the opportunity to manage a grocery store in Kennett, Missouri. He was a great store manager and after a couple of years he joined with some partners in a new store being built in growing Forrest City, Arkansas. In 1962, he and Chris loaded up their kids and made their final move to Forrest City. Arriving in Forrest City as an energetic 32 year old he immediately became involved in the chamber of commerce and industrial development. He was a hard worker and the new store quickly became a success. East Arkansas was growing and along with a couple of partners he began opening more stores. The company they founded, GES, Inc., eventually grew to 16 stores in Arkansas and Mississippi. These stores currently operate as Edwards Food Giant and Edwards Cash Saver stores. Oral was a mentor to many young men who later started their own grocery stores. For years they would call him for advice about how to handle a situation in their own stores. In his later years Oral could usually be found straightening the Kool-Aid section. He wanted to keep the cheapest price in town on Kool-Aid because it meant a family of shoppers would notice. He also liked to straighten the spices and seasoning pouches. If a customer bought one of those items they would also have to buy meat to go with it. Oral was always looking for a deal on something that he could offer to his customers at a lower price. In his younger years he loved to go to the Scott Street Market in Memphis and haggle with growers and truckers for the lowest price on a truckload of watermelons or cantaloupes.

Oral never met a stranger and shortly after he met you he would make you feel like a million dollars. His leadership skills and knowledge of the grocery business led him to be one of the charter board members and founders of the Arkansas Retail Grocers Association. Oral was presented the Arkansas Retail Grocer of the Year award by Governor Bill Clinton in 1987. He and Governor Clinton became friends and he became a confidant and advisor to the governor. He and Chris traveled to the White House to visit President Clinton on several occasions.

Oral was raised in a community with only one black man so he really never understood the racial problems that were beginning about the time he arrived in Forrest City. He always wanted to treat everyone equally. To him the grocery business was the people pleasing business and that applied to everyone. He

wanted to sell a quality product at a fair price. He was the first white merchant in Forrest City to put a person of color at a cash register. That was met with some resistance but he became known as a man who was fair to everyone.

As the business grew Oral became involved in many civic and business organizations. He was a director for many years at Planters Bank & Trust in Forrest City. He felt that his biggest accomplishment at the bank was starting Saturday banking in Forrest City. He was a proponent for the working man and felt the bank wasn't making their services available to folks that worked for a living. He became a director of the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce and was one, of only two, Lifetime Directors ever named by that organization. He served as a commissioner on the Mississippi River Parkway Commission for many years and enjoyed meeting with other commissioners up and down the river with hopes of improving the area. Even in his later years Oral was still involved in community affairs. He was recognized as Citizen of the Year by the Forrest City Area Chamber of Commerce in 2016.

He and Chris came up poor but neither of them realized it. They both came from loving families and didn't want for anything. Oral never attended a day of college but became chairman of two different college boards. He was a director and chairman of the East Arkansas Community College board for many years. He was the driving force in building the Fine Arts Center and the stage bears his name. He finally got his college degree when EACC awarded him an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree. He was also a director and chairman of the board of Baptist Memorial College of Health Sciences in Memphis, Tennessee.

The Baptist hospital organization in Memphis was very important to Oral. He served on the Board of Trustees as well as the corporate board for nearly 30 years. He also served on that organization's foundation board. Oral and Chris were always trying to help others. They started two different funds in the Baptist system. At the college they started the Christine and Oral Edwards Scholarship Fund to benefit needy students going into health care professions. As Oral spent time around the Baptist Hospital system he saw many people who were staying with loved ones but didn't have money to eat. The fund that he was most proud of was The Christine and Oral Edwards Endowment Fund. The purpose of this fund is to dispense cafeteria food vouchers for needy families through the chaplain's office.

In Oral's early years in Blytheville he was a member of the Arkansas National Guard. He left the National Guard as a 2nd Lieutenant when he moved from Blytheville. In 1957, while a guardsman, his unit was ordered to Little Rock by Governor Orville Faubus. The purpose was to keep peace and block black students from entering Central High School. Oral did not want to participate in

this but had no choice. Luckily his unit had no confrontation. Approximately 40 years later he attended a gathering which honored the Little Rock Nine. He took that opportunity to personally apologize to several of them about that day in Little Rock.

Oral and Chris had read about the world in their early years and wanted to see it. They traveled extensively across the country and the world. They visited places considered unsafe today such as Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Russia, and many other countries. Their life was not without excitement. While staying at the MGM Hotel in Las Vegas in 1980 the hotel caught fire. It is the second worst hotel fire in U.S. history and 85 people perished. Chris kept hearing sirens and realized the hotel was on fire. They ran down the hall knocking on doors and were credited with saving several lives.

Oral's hobbies were working in the stores, gardening and collecting antiques. He admired nice things and one day spotted a Boehm porcelain bird piece that he liked. Chris later bought it for him and he became a collector of the Boehm figurines. He later met Helen Boehm, owner of the Boehm studios, at an art show. They became good friends and Oral and Chris traveled with her on several excursions. While traveling with Mrs. Boehm they met Prince Charles and Princess Diana on two different occasions. They thought that was a pretty big deal for a couple of folks from Arkansas. They also traveled with Mrs. Boehm to Russia. They were present when she presented a Boehm American Eagle to Mrs. Gorbachev. It was the first item from the United States to be displayed in the Russian National Museum after the Cold War.

Oral helped lots of folks over the years. If they didn't have money for groceries he would give them food until they could pay. Many people have said that their families would have starved to death without him. His stores employed thousands over the nearly sixty year existence. Many young people had their first job working in his grocery stores. When the food pantry was started in Forrest City he was a big supporter and continued that support for many years.

Oral's life changed dramatically in 2011 when he had a near fatal auto accident. He was in full arrest at the scene and was revived. He spent four days in a coma and months in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities. He emerged weak but determined and spent the remainder of his years confined to a wheelchair. He still maintained his great attitude and continued to motivate and help others. He loved people and insisted on dining out regularly at area restaurants so he could visit with folks.

In later years Oral enjoyed coffee every morning at Burger King where a regular group met and told stories and bragged on their kids. This was the third

morning coffee location that he had frequented and he often joked that he had outlived two other groups.

When the Edwards family first moved to Forrest City they quickly found a church home at First Baptist Church. This was an important part of his life and even after his accident, he always wanted to be at church on Sunday. His best friends in life were the members of the Adult Four Men's Sunday School Class. Visitation will be 5:00-8:00 pm Monday, October 2nd at First Baptist Church in Forrest City. Funeral services will be 2:00 pm Tuesday, October 3rd at the church. Burial will follow at Forrest Park Cemetery. Stevens Funeral Home of Forrest City is in charge of arrangements. Honorary pall bearers are the Adult Four Men's Sunday School Class and Food Giant Store Managers and Supervisors. The family requests that any memorials be made to The Christine and Oral Edwards Endowment Fund at Baptist Memorial Health Care Foundation or The Christine and Oral Edwards Scholarship Fund at Baptist College of Health Sciences in Memphis. Either may be sent to: Baptist Memorial Health Care Foundation, 350 N. Humphreys Ave., Memphis, TN 38120 or to the St. Francis County Food Pantry, P.O. Box 3157, Forrest City, AR 72336.

Cemetery

Forrest Park

Hwy 1 South

Forrest City, AR,

Events

OCT **Visitation** 05:00PM - 08:00PM

2

First Baptist Church

507 N. Rosser, Forrest City, AR, US, 72335

OCT **Funeral Service** 02:00PM

3

First Baptist Church

507 N. Rosser, Forrest City, AR, US, 72335

Comments



“ As a young child (ages 5-14), we (Laura - (Edwards) - Martin Ruth Ann Martin Franklin Martin) visited with our Grandparents (Edwards) and cousins (Leslie, Oral, Cleatis and Bobby all children from Uncle Jesse and Aunt Grace. We always loved visiting with all as they were always "family" for us - we lived in Mascoutah, Illinois.

Franklin Martin - August 17, 2019 at 05:36 AM



“ Whenever we were in Forrest City visiting my parents, it was always great to talk to Oral at First Baptist Church. It will be wonderful spending eternity with him in heaven.

RICK REYNOLDS - January 29, 2018 at 10:37 AM



“ I remember working with Oral many times during the years I was employed at KXJK. Oral was a good businessman and a civic leader, and loved his family. May God be with your family at this difficult time. -Mark Kumming, Pea Ridge, AR. (KXJK radio, 1990-2003)

Mark Kumming - November 01, 2017 at 04:05 PM



“ Always enjoyed the lunches and time with Oral. A fine man that will be missed. Prayers for the Edwards family.

Chris Conger

chris conger - October 03, 2017 at 03:09 PM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



October 03, 2017 at 12:17 PM



“ Tammie Davis and the BancorpSouth team purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



Tammie Davis and the BancorpSouth team - October 03, 2017 at 11:55 AM



“ Shirley Williams Thorn lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Shirley Williams Thorn - October 02, 2017 at 09:28 PM



“ Edwards family, So sorry for the passing of Mr. Edwards a wonderful life so well lived. Thanking of your family at this sad time Mrs. Savannah Mullins of Marianna, Arkansas.

Shirley Williams Thorn - October 02, 2017 at 09:26 PM



“ On behalf of our children Hannah, Johnny and Jarrett
Thank you for such kindness and support. The family is in our thoughts and prayers
in all the days to come.



Daniel and Shea Qualls - October 02, 2017 at 07:59 PM



“ Teresa Kinder lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Teresa Kinder - October 02, 2017 at 04:43 PM



“ Way back at Holiday Inn, he and his coffee buddies would always have a smile and a
story for me as I was a waitress there. Then later he was a patient at Dr St John's
and I enjoyed getting to see him there. He was a very special man and meant a lot to
all of us. Tammy H.

Tammy Hankins - October 02, 2017 at 03:25 PM



“ I am so sorry to hear about Oral's passing. I am his 2nd cousin once removed, and
although I saw him infrequently over my life, he always treated me like a brother,
such a compassionate, caring, intelligent, impressive man. I know he will be sorely
missed by many. David Mitchell (grandson of Chester and Wenona Ahlf).

David Mitchell - October 02, 2017 at 03:11 PM



“ Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



October 02, 2017 at 02:18 PM



“ Our sincere condolences are extended to the Edwards Family
Frank & Debra Shaw



Frank Shaw III - October 02, 2017 at 01:41 PM



“ Employees @ Food Giant # 3477



Food Giant 3477 - October 02, 2017 at 01:36 PM



“ almost like my dad i got to know mr. oral he was my leader and my christian encouragement i will miss him very very much thank you his family for sharing him with us

albert lewis - October 02, 2017 at 12:41 PM



“ Edwards Cash Saver #3476, Jacksonville, AR purchased the Rainbow Of Remembrance Spray for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



Edwards Cash Saver #3476, Jacksonville, AR - October 02, 2017 at 10:41 AM



“ Bobby and Patti Wilkerson purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



Bobby and Patti Wilkerson - October 02, 2017 at 10:19 AM



“ Edwards Cash Saver 3473 Little Rock, AR purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



Edwards Cash Saver 3473 Little Rock, AR - October 02, 2017 at 08:42 AM



“ Eva Hollowell lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Eva Hollowell - October 01, 2017 at 09:07 PM



“ Divine Peace Bouquet was purchased for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



October 01, 2017 at 07:03 PM



“ Divine Peace Bouquet was purchased for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



October 01, 2017 at 04:21 PM



“ Joyce Ward lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Joyce Ward - October 01, 2017 at 03:41 PM



“ Joyce Ward lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Joyce Ward - October 01, 2017 at 03:40 PM



“ Joyce Ward lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Joyce Ward - October 01, 2017 at 03:38 PM



“ JOYCE WARD lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



JOYCE WARD - October 01, 2017 at 01:51 PM



“ Condolences To The Edwards Family Your In Ours Prayers And Thoughts

JOYCE WARD - October 01, 2017 at 02:05 PM



“ Peaceful White Lilies Basket was purchased for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



October 01, 2017 at 01:08 PM



“ Ruthie Patton lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Ruthie Patton - September 30, 2017 at 01:40 PM



“ Mr. Oral was great friends with my Dad, Leon Foust. I loved seeing him and Chris in church. Their pew was close to Mom and Dad's so we spoke often. He was always so warm and kind. He always asked about my music and I was touched by that. His passing leaves a void in FBC and Forrest City. Bless his family.

LeAnne Foust - September 30, 2017 at 01:15 PM



“ he was a good man and he will b miss for years to come RIP

john ellison - September 30, 2017 at 12:59 PM



“ I am so very sorry that Oral will not be on this earth to light it up, as he has always did! But I have no doubt that Heaven will be lite beyond measure with his presence! What a beautiful life he lived and shared so generously! He left us all with a smile in our hearts!

I'm so sorry that I can not attend the services but you are all in my thoughts and prayers.

Love to you all,

Cheryl Collins Draper

Cheryl Draper - September 30, 2017 at 09:39 AM



“ Living across the street from this family for many years, so many memories were made. I was always jealous they had the aluminum Christmas tree with the projector of changing lights. They also had the tallest TV antennae in the neighborhood which provided our entertainment during an ice storm seeing if it would hold up. What a wonderful wonderful man that will be greatly missed. RIP kind soul.

Jill Simpson - September 30, 2017 at 09:19 AM



“ Mr Oral, Im so glad to have know you,

Jess Ivy - September 30, 2017 at 08:49 AM



“ Williams lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Williams - September 30, 2017 at 04:14 AM



“ Jennifer Mccollum lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Jennifer mccollum - September 30, 2017 at 03:47 AM



“ Mr. Edwards was a man with a big heart. Luther and I were married in 1970. We became a family of five instantly. Times were hard, and every penny counted. Many times we would come up short, and not have enough for groceries. We shopped at Liberty then, which was it's name at that time. Mr. Roberts knew we were struggling. He called us over to the office one night. He told us ANYTIME we were in a tight he would gladly hold a check for us to get groceries for as long as we needed. This went on for quite some time. We never forgot that act of kindness. We still talk about it at times. Our heart-felt sympathies go out to his family. We remember all of you, and you had a wonderful father with a heart of gold. God bless. Luther and Anita Pittman

Luther and Anita Pittman - September 30, 2017 at 02:35 AM



“ A man of vision who has feed most of the delta for years...I know personally as the last time I ate at Don Jose, he made me give him my ticket so he could buy my dinner. I was humbled by his act of kindness. Rest to his soul and peace to his family.

Fr. Travis Frank
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
Forrest City



Fr. Travis Frank - September 30, 2017 at 12:37 AM



“ My thoughts and prayers are with his family and loved one's. Mr. Edwards was such a kind man . I will forever be grateful for the years I spent working at the Food Giant in Forrest City.

Jane Vaughn - September 29, 2017 at 10:37 PM



“ Don and I first met Oral and Chris at a store opening in Augusta,Ar.Our son worked for Oral. Chris and Oral were very complementary of our son telling us what a good job he was doing,see they knew how to make a parent proud.Oral and Chris had a wonderful ability to make everyone feel so welcome.We prayed for a miracle to restore Oral health,however God had a better plan and rest assured Oral received his miracle Monday morning when he closed his eyes on this earth and opened his eyes in heaven to see Chris standing next to Jesus to welcome him home.

polly proffitt - September 29, 2017 at 10:26 PM



“ Always, always with a smile on his face and a friendly word. Prayers for his family.
Boyd and Wanda Russell

wanda Russell - September 29, 2017 at 06:49 PM



“ Mr. Oral was an enthusiastic cheerleader for all his Marianna friends. He was a kindred spirit that always left us feeling uplifted and energized. He was a lovely man and a dear, dear friend. I will miss his sweet manner and kind heart.

pat audirsch - September 29, 2017 at 06:25 PM



“ 1 file added to the album New Album Name



Tricia Legault - September 29, 2017 at 06:14 PM



“ Peaceful White Lilies Basket was purchased for the family of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards.



September 29, 2017 at 03:44 PM



“ Debi Williamson Bates lit a candle in memory of Mr. Oral Winston Edwards



Debi Williamson Bates - September 29, 2017 at 02:09 PM