Ethel Lee Lance

Matriarch and Church caretaker

The life of Ethel Lee Lance, 70, epitomized loyalty, consistency and dedication to serving others. Born in Charleston where she and her husband Nathaniel Lance raised their family, Lance was a lifelong member of Emanuel AME Church. She took great pride in her beloved church, working as a custodian and helping keep its facilities clean for five years. Whether she was working, attending church services or studying her Bible, Lance was at Emanuel AME nearly seven days a week.

Lance was a hard worker, and in 1968 when Charleston’s Gaillard Municipal Auditorium opened, she began working there as a custodian and worked there until she retired in 2002. She loved to take her family to see gospel performances at the auditorium when she had a night off. Two of Lance’s daughters even had their wedding receptions at the Gaillard.

A matriarch by all accounts, she was devoted to her family’s well-being. She led her family through despair when her husband died in 1988 and when her daughter, Terrie Washington, died in 2013. Brandon Risher, the oldest of Lance’s grandchildren, remembers her as a symbol of love. Other grandchildren recall that she firmly encouraged them to succeed, and always served grits and bacon for breakfast. Lance’s loving family includes five children, six grandchildren and four great grandchildren. She never had the opportunity to see her youngest great grandchild, Jonquil Lance, Jr., who was born just before the tragedy.

Her funeral at Royal Missionary Baptist Church in North Charleston was attended by civil rights leaders such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al Sharpton, and by political leaders such as Gov. Nikki Haley, U.S. Rep. Mark Sanford and Charleston Mayor Joe Riley. The choir sang “One Day at a Time,” Lance’s favorite gospel song. Her daughter said the song gave her strength in difficult times.