

'A quiet storm'

Woman who mentored Richard Pryor remembered at service

BY SCOTT HILYARD
OF THE JOURNAL STAR



JULIETTE
WHITTAKER

PEORIA — Juliette Whittaker might be most broadly remembered as the person who saw and nurtured talent in a young Richard Pryor where lots of others saw an annoying show-off.

But at her funeral service Monday, appropriately held in the music and theater room inside the Carver Community Center, where

Please see **MENTOR**. Page B5

POS 5/8/07

MENTOR

Continued from Page B1

she spent a large portion of her life, longtime friend Percy Baker Jr. had a more specific memory.

"So much of her life was so notable," Baker, Carver's executive director, told a gathering of about 100 friends and family members, "but she was one of the first African Americans I can think of to drive a Volvo. She loved that Volvo."

Whittaker, who was 80, died last Wednesday at Bel-Wood Nursing Home. The civil rights activist and founder of Carver's School of Arts and Drama and of the fondly remembered Learning Tree Day School, Whittaker was honored Monday as a quiet, stoic woman who touched, even saved, the lives of countless disadvantaged children.

"Juliette's purpose has ended, but her purpose in life was to save the lives of those who grew up beneath the umbrella of the Carver Community Center," said Don Jackson, attorney and president of the local chapter of the NAACP. "She was a wonderful lady and quite a legend to those who grew up in the Carver Center."

Laraine Bryson, head of the Tri-County Urban League, wistfully recalled the good job, to hang-in-there, handwritten notes of inspiration and encouragement Whittaker wrote her that always seemed to show up at the right moment.

"She was a tiny lady, a classy lady. A package well put together, but a quiet storm. An awesome educator," Bryson said.

In an interview in 2005 one week after comedian Pryor died in California, Whittaker addressed her role in helping form, arguably Peoria's most famous human export.

"Everybody needs encouragement. Very few people operated out of a vacuum. Somebody, somewhere must inspire them to do something different from what people are doing around them," she said. "It wasn't just me. (I just) put a crack in the door."

Jackson spoke about Whittaker's connection with Pryor's success at the memorial service.

"With Richard Pryor there were a lot of us who wanted to slap him away, like an annoying mosquito. She saw a lot of talent," Jackson said. "She was right. We were wrong."

Scott Hilyard can be reached at 686-3244 or shilyard@pjstar.com.