



### INDIANOLA NATIVE

Rose Mary Stiffin has taught at Florida Memorial University since 1999.

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# Biochemistry professor experiments as novelist

By CHARLIE SMITH

Rose Mary Stiffin holds a doctorate in biochemistry from the University of Tennessee at Memphis.

As chair of the Health and Natural Sciences Department at Florida Memorial University, she teaches the kind of classes most students fear: organic chemistry and the like.

So you'd expect someone with a scientific mind to focus on the concrete world we can see and touch in a laboratory.

But Stiffin has a burgeoning hobby in the fine arts that she'd like to make a side career: writing novels.

The Indianola native has penned four so far and is working on a fifth.

Her creative side began developing in the only other job she's had outside of science — and an unlikely one for most academics — picking and chopping cotton.

Growing up near Indianola, her family lived on Powell Poe's land and worked his cotton fields as well as those belonging to Jack Allen, whose house was not far from where they lived. She started picking at 4 and chop-

ping at 7.

"To make the day go by, because it was arduous work but didn't require a brain, I would make up stories in my head," she said. "It may have been a love story because I'm a romantic at heart."

Sometimes she'd take a cotton boll and turn it upside down, like a ball gown. It demonstrated a way of looking at things from a different perspective that would prove valuable.

For instance, how many 9-year-olds tell their father they are going to be a biochemist? At least one.

"I don't know where that thought came from. It may have been that I read an article that word was in and it sounded neat," she said.

However the idea began, Stiffin never seemed to deviate from it. She excelled at Gentry High School in Indianola and received an academic scholarship to Missis-

sippi Valley State University after graduating in 1974. She majored in chemistry and received her master's degree in organic chemistry from Mississippi State. After working for a while, she entered graduate school at 31 to begin work on her doctorate. She finished in 1994 and graduated in 1995, and her mother was able to attend before her death in June

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1996. "I kept my eyes focused on what God wanted me to do. ... I think because of our upbringing we probably had to be focused," she said.

That kind of academic success seems to be commonplace in the Stiffin household.

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## AN IMPACT AS AN EDUCATOR

*Rose Mary Stiffin, left, has helped put more than 70 students in medical school and graduate school over the past 16 years in her role as chair of the Health and Natural Sciences Department at Florida Memorial University. She's pictured with Sonisha Warren, right, a former student whom Stiffin trained that now has a Ph.D. in molecular biology, and Dr. Gershwin Blyden, a hematologist and a member of the university's Board of Trustees.*

All five of her siblings (all of them are graduates of Gentry) have college degrees. Her oldest brother, Joe, was a biology teacher for years in the Indianola public schools; her second-oldest a music major; her sister a chemist with the U.S. Department of Energy; her third brother an engineer with Monsanto; her youngest brother holds a master's degree in horticulture/botany.

"That is somewhat unheard of coming from the '60s," Stiffin said. "My mother and father, who were uneducated, they knew the value of education."

She believes her parents would have also followed a course toward the sciences if they had had the opportunity. Her father, Joe, who died when Stiffin was 12, could have been a physicist or astronomer, she says.

"I remember he woke us up at night to go see a meteor shower. And he didn't have to do this. He loved the wonderment of nature," she said.

Her mother, Isabella, possessed problem-solving skills and loved putting things back together: It's a perfect fit for a mechanical engineer, Stiffin thinks.

Her mother also showed great fortitude. After her father died, her mother "never showed any dependence on anyone else. If she couldn't afford something, it was-

n't bought." Her mother made their clothes; Stiffin had to wear her brother's shoes in first grade; they got a coat once a year, meaning sometimes they didn't have one.

That was the reality, and they didn't know anything else. Now Stiffin realizes that it was rather unique to become what they became.

The Christian home focused on going to church every Sunday and belief in the Golden Rule. She said all the Stiffins were known as being nice and smart, not rich or pretty.

To this day, all the Stiffin children hold onto the lessons from their parents: If make a bill, you pay a bill; try not to owe any man and be responsible, she says.

After getting her doctorate, Stiffin taught for a year at Rust College in Holly Springs. She liked working with students but said the pay wasn't enough to live on.

In 1999 she moved to Florida Memorial and has been there ever since.

In addition to teaching and research, she's had time to develop her literary efforts. She started out publishing short stories in literary magazines and work she intended as a short story blossomed into her first novel, "Walk in Bethel." When she couldn't get

a character right, it seemed to unveil itself in a vision, she said. She sat down and started writing, and it seemed as if the characters were telling her what to say.

"I truly believe that somewhere these people exist. I don't know where; I don't know how," Stiffin said.

The work is not biographical or autobiographical, she says, but is a family saga spanning five generations that is set in the Delta. It begins in 1893 and goes through the 1980s.

She shopped it to publishers, but when no one picked it up, she stopped writing for more than a decade because she said she felt that maybe story wasn't going to be accepted.

But then at some point, she decided to forget about what others thought and begin anew. She had lost all of the files but rewrote it and said she didn't lose a single page.

"Even though I didn't write for 10 years, the characters had never left me," she said.

She self-published the novel, and it's available at Amazon.com on Kindle, Nook and paperback.

The novel recently earned honorable mention in the Amsterdam Book Festival.

Stiffin comes home to Indianola every Christmas to visit family and did book signings a few years ago at da House of Khafre and the Crown.

As for what she'd like to write about now, a colleague asked if she planned on doing a prequel to "Walk in Bethel" set before 1893, and she said she has that on the backburner.

She'd loved to write about the life of her mother, who overcame a difficult childhood to help shape her six children into professionals, but Stiffin said she doesn't know enough about it to write the memoir. Her fifth novel, "Casino Blues," is in progress.

So the future is wide open — and you can never put any restraints on what a cotton picker turned biochemist turned novelist will do next.

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