

New school honors black trailblazer

Nixon won landmark voting rights case

By Ramon Renteria

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A new Northeast elementary school will be named for Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon, the El Pasoan who won a landmark



Nixon

Supreme Court decision reaffirming voting rights for blacks all over the United States.

El Paso school officials voted Tuesday night to name the \$4 million North Hills elementary school in honor of the pioneer black physician.

Nixon filed suit in 1924, after blacks were barred from voting in Texas Democratic primaries. The case wended its way through the courts until 1944, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional.

Nixon died in a car accident in 1966.

"If there is one lesson any of us can learn from his experience, it has to be this: Never, never give up," trustee Sal Mena said.

Mena led the committee that selected the school's name. The campus, on a 10-acre site at Loma Franklin and Marcus Uribe, is to open in September.

"It's a long time coming," said retired schoolteacher Leona Washington. "He left a beautiful legacy and opened the door to understanding among races."

Jethro Hills, former Northeast El Paso city representative and the first black elected to El Paso's City Council, said: "It means an awful lot for younger people — a realization that they can succeed and be recognized for their own personal worth."

It's the first time since public schools were desegregated in the 1950s that an El Paso school has been named after a black person.

Douglass School, once El Paso's segregated school for blacks, was named after Frederick Douglass, a runaway slave and scholar.

■ **New principals:** Burges, other schools get new leaders / 2B

Black healer waged courageous struggle for racial equality

By Leon Lynn

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It's doubtful that Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon would have wanted a school named after him, his daughter says.

"I don't think he'd have wanted people to make that much of a fuss over him," said Edna McIver, one of four children raised in El Paso by the doctor and civil-rights pioneer.

"He wouldn't think it was necessary. He was just that kind of person," she said.

Nixon, who died in 1966 at age 82, is perhaps best remembered for his role in the 20-year legal battle that struck down racial voting barriers in Texas.

But his good works on behalf of El Pasoans are countless. For 53 years he tended to the poor, delivering their babies and treating their illnesses, often forgetting to send a bill when he knew a patient couldn't afford it.

Racism was out in the open in El Paso in Nixon's day: In 1922 three Ku Klux Klan candidates won big victories in an El Paso school-board election. Twenty-three years later, when McIver reached the 1st grade, blacks still were restricted to Douglass School, where the books were tattered castoffs from white schools and the library was a broom closet.

A cultured man who cherished Cervantes and Dickens, Nixon couldn't take his family to an El Paso movie house or a restaurant because white society, and its laws, treated him as less than a man.

Nixon was born in 1884 in Marshall, Texas. After graduating from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn., in 1906 he opened an

DR. NIXON'S LEGACY



■ **TODAY** is the first day of school for the 65,000 students in the El Paso Independent School District. It's also the first-ever day of classes at Dr. Lawrence Nixon Elementary School at 11141 Loma Roja Drive.

■ **THE SCHOOL**, named for a black physician who waged a landmark 20-year legal battle for black voting rights, will serve students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5.

■ **NIXON**, who died in 1966, is fondly remembered for his gentle manner, his compassion for the poor and his tireless efforts in behalf of civil rights.

office in Cameron, Texas, about 50 miles southeast of Waco.

He left Cameron in 1910 after witnessing a lynching near his office. Some historical accounts say a black man was hanged that day. But McIver, who grew up listening to her father recount his horror, says the mob burned its victim at the stake.

"He remembered little chil-

■ **SEE NIXON** / PAGE B-2

dren cheering and dancing in the streets while it was happening," she said.

Nixon arrived in El Paso in 1910 and set up his first medical office at 101 S. Campbell St. He sang in the choir at the Myrtle Avenue Methodist Church and became active in Democratic Party politics, and his practice prospered.

Leona Washington, now 53, was one of the thousands of El Pasoans guided into this world by Nixon's strong, sure hands.

Because Nixon was black, he couldn't admit patients to El Paso hospitals or perform surgery, Washington said. "He would have to call on Anglo physicians to do all his surgery for him."

Nixon was also a founding member of the El Paso chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1924 the group decided to challenge a law that prevented blacks from voting in primary elections — the only elections that mattered in Democrat-controlled Texas — and Nixon was picked as the plaintiff for the case.

The choice of Nixon was a good one, according to El Paso historian Conrey Bryson, who wrote a book about Nixon's court fight, titled "Dr.

Lawrence A. Nixon and the White Primary." Nixon was a good Democrat who had voted before, Bryson said. And unlike many blacks, he didn't have to worry about getting fired by a vindictive white boss.

And, Bryson said in his 1977 book, Nixon wasn't afraid.

On July 26, 1924, Nixon brought a valid poll-tax receipt to the fire station at 2317 Texas St. and tried to vote in a Democratic primary election. Years later he told Bryson that he remembered the scene as a cordial one. The election judges, who were friends of Nixon's, asked about his health.

Then one of them said, "Dr. Nixon, you know we can't let you vote." He replied: "I know you can't. But I've got to try."

The lawsuit, filed the following week, was the first attack in a legal battle that lasted two decades. Nixon himself went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court twice. McIver still has the pen Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes used to write of the decisions in her father's favor.

But every time a court decision outlawed a racist voting practice, party bosses found another technicality, and the legal maneuvering

would have to start again.

It was 1944 before yet another Supreme Court decision, in a case brought by another plaintiff, wiped away the last loophole, and Nixon and his wife were able to walk into that fire station and cast ballots.

Other segregation laws and practices remained — El Paso schools didn't integrate until 1955, for example — but historians say black voting rights played a big role in striking them down.

In a letter last July to his fellow El Paso school district trustees, Sal Mena wrote: "It is appropriate, given his impact on this nation, this city and our school district, that we should name the new North Hills school ... in memory of this outstanding citizen." The board approved the idea unanimously.

Beginning today, Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon Elementary school will serve children from kindergarten through grade 5.

And while Nixon himself may have disapproved of all the fuss, those who remember the gentle pioneer say it's fitting to lend his name to a place where the light of reason will be passed along to future generations.