Evansville Honors the First Black Ph.D. in Mathematics and His Family

Talitha M. Washington

About four years ago I came across the Mathematicians of the African Diaspora website and discovered that the first Black in the world to earn a Ph.D. in mathematics was from my neighborhood in Evansville, Indiana. While growing up, no one talked to me about Elbert Frank Cox, who is the first Black in the world to earn a Ph.D. in mathematics. After stumbling upon Elbert, excitement came over me and then I became curious about who he was and what motivated him to be successful in mathematics.

In 2001 I became the second African American from Evansville to earn a Ph.D. in mathematics. Thus, I felt a personal responsibility and an obligation to give Evansville and the world an opportunity to thank Elbert for his accomplishments as they opened doors for me and many other mathematicians.

In 1895 Elbert Frank Cox was born to Johnson and Eugenia Cox at 715 Oak Street in Evansville, Indiana (which is located less than one mile from where I grew up). Elbert’s father, Johnson D. Cox, was principal and teacher for over forty years at Third Avenue School. In those days the Evansville schools were segregated and Third Avenue School was an elementary school for African Americans. There is no confirmation that J. D. had an advanced degree but it was common to not have a college degree before entering the teaching profession. However, J. D. did further his education by taking courses at Indiana University in the summer of 1927 and the summer and fall of 1928. He continued his studies by completing four summer courses from 1930 to 1939 at Evansville College, which is now my place of employment, the University of Evansville. J. D. Cox must have known the value of an education which then led him to encourage his son, Elbert, to succeed.

In 1913 Elbert graduated from Clark High School and enrolled at Indiana University. In 1915 Cox joined Kappa Alpha Psi, which is a Black fraternity that emphasizes achievement. When Cox received his transcript from IU, it had “Colored Student” printed across the top. At that time it was common for colleges and universities to distinguish race on an academic transcript. By doing so, employers would immediately know if the person was Black so that they could grant or deny a position based on race.

After graduation, Cox taught for a year at Alves Street School in Henderson, Kentucky. Later he entered the U.S. Army and taught at Shaw University. He had enrolled in summer graduate classes at Cornell University as early as 1920 to learn more about science. After a couple of years Cox left Shaw to study mathematics at Cornell University. Under the supervision of William Lloyd Garrison Williams, Cox completed and successfully defended his dissertation “Polynomial Solutions of Difference Equations”. In 1925 he became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. in mathematics.

Talitha M. Washington is assistant professor of mathematics at the University of Evansville. Her email address is tw65@evansville.edu.

The author and the plaque dedicated to J. D. Cox and his son Elbert Frank Cox in Evansville, Indiana.
American to receive a Ph.D. in mathematics and the first graduate of an Evansville high school to receive a Ph.D. degree. Ironically and sadly, during the year that Elbert joined an elite group of only twenty-eight men who were awarded Ph.D.’s in mathematics in the country, thirty-one Black men were lynched.

After leaving Cornell he went on to become the head of the Math and Physics Departments at West Virginia State University. In the summers he would visit his brother, Avalon, in Princeton, Indiana. At Avalon’s church, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, he met Beulah Kaufman and married her after a six-year courtship. In 1929 he joined the faculty at Howard University. In those days many Black scholars migrated to Howard University. In 1929 Cox joined the faculty, and by 1943, Howard University employed five of the eight Black math Ph.D.’s. Cox retired in 1965 and passed on in 1969.

Sometimes I wonder if J. D. Cox knew that his passion for education would encourage his son to become a trailblazer for so many. On November 18, 2006, Evansville welcomed J. D. Cox’s grandson and great-grandchildren to a dedication ceremony of a plaque at Liberty Baptist Church. In the main hallway of the Liberty, one can still find J. D. Cox’s picture hanging on the wall.

The ceremony stirred up various emotions of thanks and gratitude from the Cox family for their forefathers. J. D.’s great-grandson, Elbert Lucien Cox Jr., spoke about how the educational legacy of his family contributed to his accomplishments. He now serves as a program manager for NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). J. D.’s grandson was touched by the presence of the brothers of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity who proudly wore the red blazers in their support of their Kappa brother, Elbert. At the end of the ceremony the Cox family was moved by J. D.’s students as they stood up and gave testimonials about how he encouraged and inspired all children to do better.

On that day, the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation, University of Evansville, University of Southern Indiana, and Ivy Tech Community College joined together to support the plaque that reads:

HOME OF
JOHNSON DUNCAN COX
J. D. COX (1873–1952) WAS A TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL AT THIRD AVENUE SCHOOL FOR 40 YEARS. IN 1925, HIS SON, ELBERT FRANK COX, BECAME THE FIRST GRADUATE OF AN EVANSVILLE HIGH SCHOOL TO RECEIVE A PH.D. DEGREE AND THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN TO EARN A PH.D. IN MATHEMATICS

My hope is that a child will stroll by the plaque, pause, and then read it and become amazed. The child will realize that “if Elbert could earn such a high degree in mathematics, then I can do anything.” Behind the child, a parent will follow, and after reading the plaque, the parent will gaze at the nearby tulip tree and know that her child has no limitations in this world. The parent will know that J. D.’s passion for education helped his son succeed, and will become encouraged to value her own child’s education. When the child becomes frustrated in mathematics, the parent will provide a kind reminder about the man named Cox who broke through racial barriers and stereotypes to become the first African American to earn the Ph.D. in mathematics.