Embracing the spirit of equality

In 1920, Olive Johnson, a bright, ambitious young woman from Brantford, Ontario, arrived at Spring Arbor Seminary with $50 in her pocket and faith and courage in her heart. Johnson is long considered to be Spring Arbor’s first black student.

Having been raised in a Christian home, and having attended a Free Methodist church, Johnson decided to complete her high school education at Spring Arbor.

“Insults, she continued to overcome and excel. “With God’s help and Papa’s challenge prodding me, I graduated.” She would later live in the Detroit area and, despite early difficulties finding a job because of her race, she eventually secured a job as a teacher for the Inkster School District and later as a school social worker in 1948. She had gained much of her social work experience during her work at the Jackson Y.W.C.A. as the first Negro Girl Reserve Advisor. Since graduating from high school in 1924, Johnson went on to distinguish herself as a professional and an activist — inspiring countless people, especially those of her race.

In 1971, Johnson was honored by Spring Arbor as the Alumna of the Year. At the time, her niece, Marilyn (Johnson ’66) Hayes had this to say, “You were always a source of inspiration to me; a person to whom I could turn for both spiritual guidance and for encouragement to make the most of my life. You always gave freely of your time and your good advice. During the years when I was growing up, I could look to your life

when I needed an example of courage, kindness, resourcefulness, warmth, or any of the other qualities that are so essential for making a whole person. Part of what I am, I owe to you.”

Hayes’ brother, Stephen Johnson, who taught in Spring Arbor’s Adult Studies program in the mid 80s, also found his aunt to be a great source of inspiration and motivation. “My Aunt Olive was one of those iconic persons in the whole Johnson family who every family wishes they had,” says Stephen. He remembers his Aunt Olive encouraging him to not become distracted, but rather to stay the course since, from her perspective, education was the key to achieving excellence. She wanted everyone to realize their own potential and be determined to succeed at whatever they were called to in life.

Olive Johnson passed away in Brantford, Ontario, on May 21, 1982.