

Barbara Gardner Proctor President, Proctor & Gardner Advertising, Chicago, Ill.

Carrie Baxter would always tell her little granddaughter Barbara Gardner Proctor that she would grow-up to be “somebody.”

It was the 1940s and the living certainly wasn't easy, especially for black families living in Black Mountain. Born in Asheville, Barbara went to live with her grandmother at the age of four.

Mrs. Baxter would take young Barbara with her to open the summer homes in Montreat of wealthy white families coming to the mountains for a stay during the summer months.

It was customary in those days for white women to pat black children on the head and talk about how cute they were and then asking the children to sing and perform for them. Sometimes they would say, “ain't she cute.” And Mrs. Baxter would say, “no she ain't cute, but she's right smart and she's going to amount to something.”

She attended Craigmont Elementary School and graduated from Stephens-Lee High School in Asheville in 1950. She went on to enroll at Taladega College in Alabama and earned a degree in English and education in three years. She stayed a fourth year and earned two other degrees in sociology and psychology.

After graduation, she headed to Chicago and went to work for a record company. Soon she began sending stories about some of the musicians and recording stars she came in contact with to the popular Down Beat magazine. The editors of the magazine enjoyed her writing so much that she was hired as a contributing editor and critic. She stayed on that job for 10 years, earning as much as \$30,000 a year.

But after a bad marriage that ended with a divorce, Mrs. Proctor decided to change directions, choosing the advertising business. She started out earning \$8,500 a year writing the back labels for PineSol. And within five years, she was earning \$30,000 a year as creative director of the company.

Later, Mrs. Proctor, her boss and several co-workers resigned in protest over a management dispute and she was promptly fired from her next job when she became disturbed at the advertising practices the firm was engaged in. And with that, she decided to take the giant step and start her own business.

Mrs. Proctor sent a telegram to a friend a bass player with Count Basie saying, "send what you can when you can."

"The next day he sent \$1,000, and with that and about \$2,000 in severance pay, I rented a three-room second-floor apartment over a pizza parlor. I got one of my friends who was an art director to work for me for practically nothing, hired a secretary and started."

Later, she was able to obtain an \$80,000 bank loan with a Small Business Administration guarantee. Six months went by before she got her first client, the second client came along shortly, "and three months later we were on our way.

The move from the pizza parlor to sparkling offices in a brand new 36-story high-rise was a memorable day, she said.

In addition to a new look, Proctor & Gardner Advertising Agency quickly got the word out that the firm was somewhat unusual compared to others.

"We made it clear that we were kind of different. We said we would not take liquors and cigarettes, which was kind of an interesting position for a small agency to come out with --- starting out by saying who we weren't interested in.

"By the time we started approaching people, word had gotten out and people felt they were special if we wanted their business," Mrs. Proctor said.

Though surrounded by the glow of success and personal achievement, Mrs. Proctor never forgot her roots in the small town of Black Mountain.

"We had no water except a well, an outhouse and no electricity until I was 10 years old," she said. "Sometimes people here talk about how poor it was, and it was, but because almost everyone was poor we didn't feel poor; and was like an extended family. It was really a wonderful warm place to be."

Although her grandmother did not live to see Mrs. Proctor found her own company, she had become an international jazz critic and had begun winning awards in advertising by the time Mrs. Baxter died in 1963.

“She got a chance to see that I eventually was going to be somebody, just like she always said I would.”

According to Great American Business Leaders, Mrs. Proctor launched the first advertising agency owned and managed by an African American woman in 1970. She gained a strong reputation for integrity by refusing to accept assignments for objectionable products and advertising that demeaned women or African Americans. Over the years, she built her agency into the second largest advertising firm run by an African American by securing business from Jewel Foods, Sears, Roebuck and Company and Alberto-Culver. Born in 1932 in Asheville, NC., Mrs. Proctor retired in 1996.

Portions of this story were taken from a featured story written by Barbara Blake and published Jan. 28, 1984 in the Asheville Citizen-Times.