

Edward K. Nichols, lawyer, minister

By JOHN F. MORRISON
Philadelphia Daily News



EDWARD K. NICHOLS Jr. decided at the age of 8 that he wanted to be a preacher.

After all, his father was a prominent minister. But by 18, he had changed his mind. He decided to be a lawyer.

He became a well-respected lawyer, assistant district attorney in the Richardson Dilworth administration, and in private practice with some of the most notable black attorneys and future judges in the city.

Then, in middle age, the call to the ministry came back with renewed force. He was ordained in 1956 and eventually became pastor of

Greater St. Matthew Independent Church in West Philadelphia.

Edward Nichols, lawyer, preacher, jazz pianist and veteran of the legendary Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, died Saturday, November 24, 2007. He was 89 and lived in West Philadelphia.

"He was a very colorful character," said his wife of 52 years, the former Ethel W. Williams. "He was not a traditional pastor. He didn't like a lot of pomp and circumstance and formal rituals.

"But he genuinely loved people. He had a way of making each person he met feel special. He was definitely a people person."

Edward's years in the Dilworth administration were among his most fulfilling, she said.

"He had a great fondness for Dilworth. It was a wonderful time to be part of the district attorney's office. It was kind of a golden era."

Dilworth, and his fellow Chestnut Hill blueblood, Joseph S. Clark, turned out the old, entrenched Republican administration in the early '50s and sought to hire the best and the brightest to help them run the city.

Edward Nichols was born in Atlanta. His late father, the Rev. Edward K. Nichols Sr., was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal denomination and was assigned to various churches in New England before coming to Philadelphia to pastor Mount Pisgah AME Church and AME Union Church.

His late mother, Laura Ella Drake Nichols, was a highly regarded social worker specializing in child care. Their son was 12 when they arrived in Philadelphia. He enrolled in elementary school and then went to Central High, from which he graduated.

He went on to Fisk University, in Nashville, and after two years transferred to Lincoln University, in Chester County. After graduation, he entered the Army and became a member of the all-black 332nd Fighter Group, which trained at Tuskegee, Ala.

"I had Coca-Cola bottles for glasses and couldn't be a pilot," he once said. But he entered Officers Candidate School and eventually was commissioned a first lieutenant and supervised training programs.

After the war, he received his law degree from Howard University. He started in Philadelphia as a criminal lawyer, then became an assistant district attorney.

After his Dilworth years, he returned to private practice in a firm that included such notable members as J. Austin Norris, a pioneering black attorney; A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., later chief judge of the U.S. 3rd Circuit Appeals Court; Clifford Scott Green, future U.S. District Court judge, and Doris May Harris, future Common Pleas judge.

"He was a brilliant thinker," his wife said. "He was well-thought-of by other members of the bar. He was an excellent lawyer."

After his ordination, Edward became an associate pastor of Greater St. Matthew Church under the Rev. Mahlon Lewis. When Lewis died in 1974, the congregation elected Edward the pastor.

He did a lot of pro bono work when other pastors came to him for legal advice, to write constitutions and by-laws, file for non-profit status and the like. He never turned anyone down.

He also was active with the Black Clergy, becoming its vice president. He worked for the election of W. Wilson Goode, the city's first black mayor, but turned away any idea of running for office himself.

He was a member of the board of the Crime Prevention Association and the National Council on Alcoholism.

Edward was an excellent piano player. He could play any kind of music but preferred jazz.