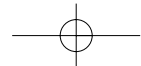
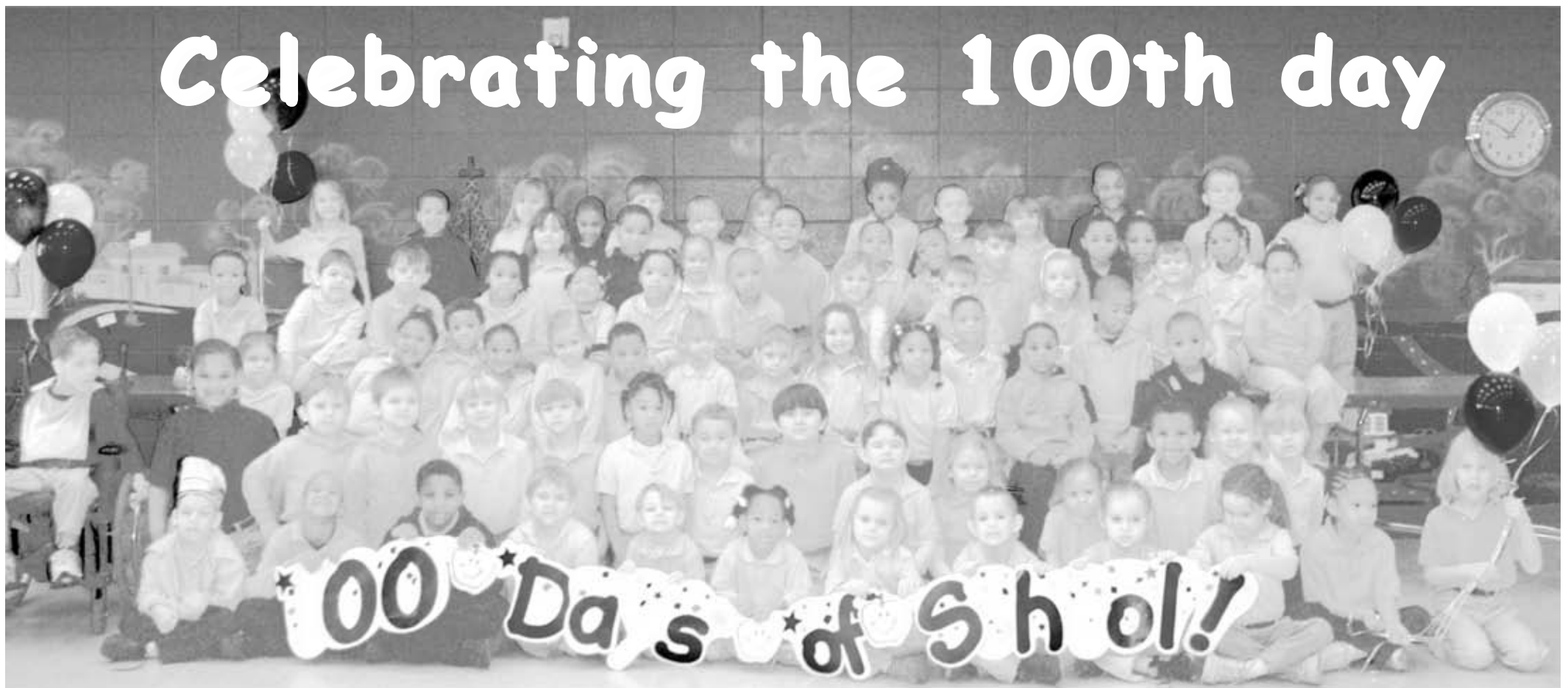
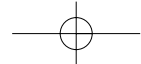
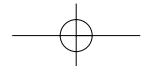
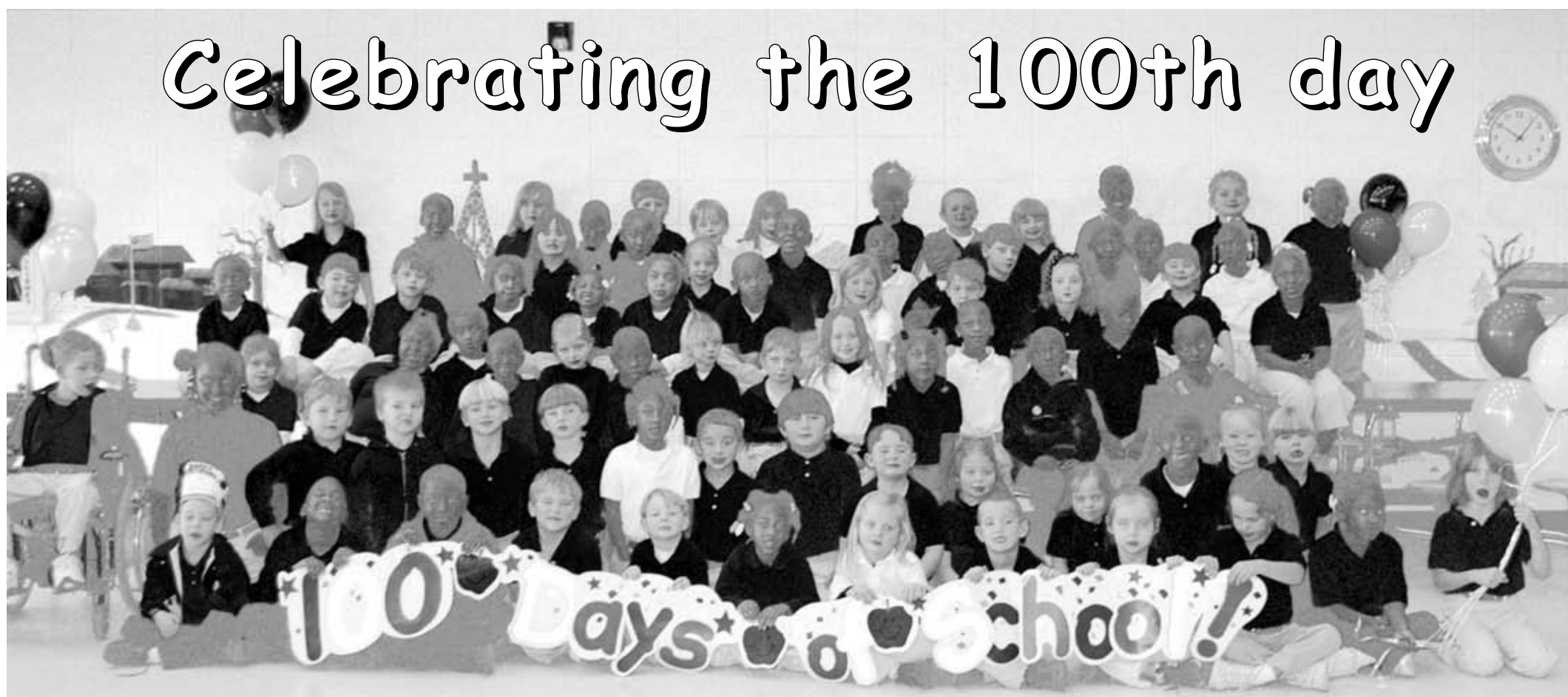
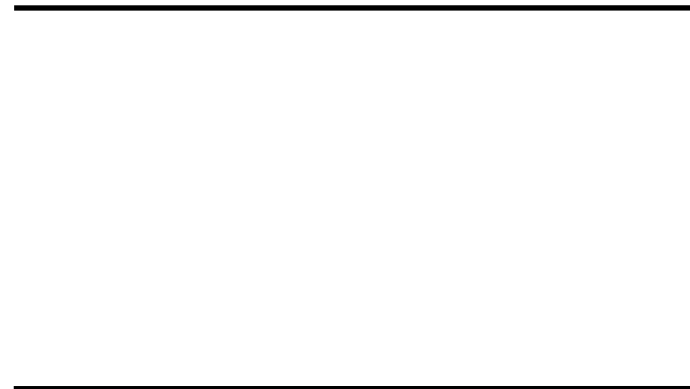


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■ School social worker talks about her work to help children and families in Choctaw

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — “At the end of every day I ask myself, ‘Have you done everything you could to help people today?’”

For Tikisha Brooks Graham, every day is an opportunity to reach out to another child, a chance to help another family, a time to work toward making life better for students in Choctaw County’s public schools.

It’s part of her job as Social Worker for the school system. But, to Graham, it’s so much more than a job. It’s a calling that she felt when she was still a student herself.

While attending high school at Southeast Lauderdale just outside of Meridian, Graham entered an educational program that required her to work 10 hours each week. The program landed her into a position working alongside young children at the Boys & Girls Club in Meridian.

Her experiences there served to change her life, giving her a sense of purpose that she would carry with her into college and career.

“I ended up working there (Boys and Girls Club) for 8 years,” she says. “It helped me mature and helped me learn to deal with situations between parents and children. I loved every minute of it ... and to get paid for it, too, was great.”

Following high school, Graham attended Meridian Community College and then Mississippi State University, where she obtained her bachelor’s degree in Social Work. All the while, she continued her work with the Boys and Girls Club, giving up most of her afternoons to work with the children there.

But her outreach to the children did not stop when the day was over. She often invited them to her home on the weekends to build a closer relationship with those whom she was trying to



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Tikisha Brooks Graham sits at her desk at the Central Office in Butler. In addition to her job as Social Worker for the school system, she is the mother of two sons and the step-mother of 2 daughters. She also volunteers at the Boys and Girls Club in Meridian, a role she has had for 14 years.

help.

“I would take some of the girls home with me over the weekend,” she explains. “I had 5- to 18-year-olds, and I would take the younger teenage girls to my house.”

Graham developed a mentoring relationship with the young, underprivileged girls who needed her guidance. It was easy to relate to them, she says, because she had once been where they were.

“They were mostly living in the projects, and they didn’t know there was a world outside of theirs,” she explains. “I’m a product of living in the projects. I knew how it felt.”

Having grown up in Rhode Island, Graham moved to Meridian as a young teen. Times were hard, she says, and her mother, who was a Yantley native, worked night and day to provide, but her neighborhood was a rough place to live. Later, she drew on those experiences in her outreach to the young children from the Boys and Girls Club.

“I knew how it felt to live in that kind of situation,” she says. “But I told them that what IS doesn’t always determine what will be.”

For a short time, Graham worked with Weems Community

Mental Health Center in Meridian, where her focus was on helping the teenagers at Meridian High School. When she came to work in Choctaw County as Social Worker for the Board of Education, her experiences in Meridian again helped her reach out of young, underprivileged children.

“I see a lot of the same kind of thing here,” she says. “There are families here who’ve never been to Meridian, never been to the mall. We go there like it’s nothing, but there are some children who don’t know what life is like anywhere else. I’m a real advocate of helping kids get to other places.”

For some children, Graham says, getting to those ‘other places’ simply means finding a way to deal with circumstances in their lives that might hinder their education.

“Some people think that social workers just come to your home and take your children,” she says. “But that’s not what we’re all about. Our job is to help the children and their families in whatever way they need, and a lot of what we do is to help them at home so they can do well at school, get a good education, make a better life for themselves.”

Graham works alongside teachers, students, and parents to deal with

such issues as truancy, behavior problems, difficulties that arise from poverty, and family crises that affect a young child’s life.

“In cases of fire or circumstances where the kids might lose everything, I do everything I can to help,” she says. “I’ve been amazed to see how the community gets together to help people. Families have been given food, furniture, household items — whatever is needed.”

Her quest to help families in crisis led Graham to form a relationship with the Birmingham-based Angel Friday ministry, a benevolent group who had helped reach out to hurting families in Choctaw County on several occasions over the last few months. Graham, along with the Angel Friday ministry team, provided Christmas gifts for several needy families in December.

After 5 years in Choctaw County, Graham says she has come to know many of the students and their families who need help. Her role means not only working with students in schools, but also doing ‘home visits’ that involve traveling to every part of the county to the homes of children who are under her care.

“What IS doesn’t always determine what will be.”

-- Tikisha Graham

“My job means that sometimes I deal with the whole family, not just the child,” she explains. “Sometimes you think people have got it together, but you don’t know what’s going on underneath. You have to establish a relationship with the family so they will trust you and you can help them.”

Graham’s job also means dealing with behavior problems that may be hindering a student’s academic progress. While sometimes those problems mean working with the student alone, others require reaching out to the whole family.

“Sometimes I can give the parents ideas of how to handle the problems,” she says. “It may just mean listening so they can work it out on their own.”

And, Graham admits, sometimes her job means that struggling parents lash out at her in frustration.

“Sometimes parents have to unload on someone, and that happens to be me,” she says. “I just have to assure them that I’m there to help them, and keep doing what I know I need to do.”

One of her many roles includes connecting teachers and parents to ensure a working relationship that helps the child. Sometimes that may mean taking a teacher with her on home visits so that the teacher can better understand the child’s environment.

“It makes a difference when a teacher sees where a child comes from,” she explains. “The teachers who’ve taken that opportunity have different views now.”

“Parents respond to that, too,” she adds. “Some have had bad experiences in previous school years. Breaking down those barriers can change everything.”

Graham’s efforts to connect teachers and parents has even meant providing transportation for a mother who needed to meet with a teacher but had no means to get there.

“We have good parents here,” she says emphatically. “But some-

times they only do what they know to do. We have to help them in order to help their children.”

But one of her most vital roles, she says, is helping guide students in making the right choices for their futures.

“I tell girls and boys to please make choices that you can live with,” she explains. “Decide what will happen if you do this, and if you — and your family — are able to live with it.”

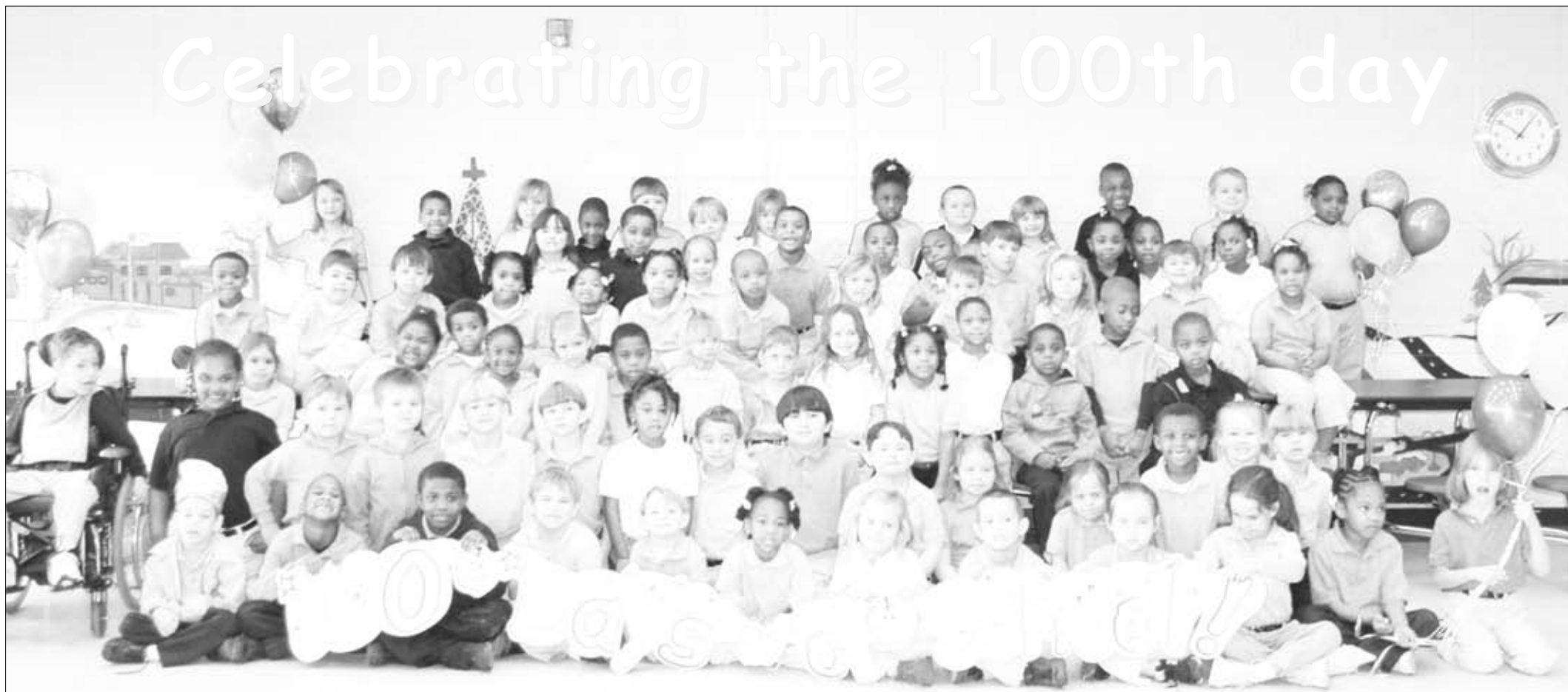
“I’ve dealt with a lot of serious issues with young people,” she says. “I’ve dealt with suicidal thoughts. We’ve had children here who’ve been saved from taking that step because we helped. I’ve dealt with lots of self-esteem issues. There are so many problems that our kids need help with. That’s what I’m here for.”

In an effort to better help the children of Choctaw County, Graham is now working to complete her Master’s degree. Her quest for more education, she says, will give her all the training necessary to help in more serious situations that may require additional expertise.

But even without her new degree, Graham admits that her desire to help children is not just the result of her education. Rather, it is a desire that was created within her through a high school job that gave her a taste for helping others that has lasted throughout her life.

“The Boys and Girls Club helped me learn to take it day by day and to remember why I’m here,” she says. “You don’t just happen to go into this profession. You have to have a strong love and desire to help improve people’s lives, which means helping them to deal with relationships, solve personal and family problems, and function the best way they can in their environment.”

“I guess I had a magnet for this kind of work,” she says with obvious passion. “I’ve always wanted to help kids, especially those that others wanted to throw away.”



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
GILBERTOWN -- Students at Southern Choctaw Elementary celebrated the 100th day of the school year last Wednesday with a party, balloons, and some good snacks. The celebration is an annual event at SCES that helps to bring a little excitement to the school year. Pictured are members of the Kindergarten classes.

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