



Peeling Back the Layers of The Celestine Bed and Breakfast

By Savannah Evanoff

Cornelia Marie Robinson Edwards & Bronson Edwards / Photos by Natalie Allgyer

"Well do."

It's the phrase Cornelia Marie Robinson Edwards surmises her great-grandmother, Celestine, might say if she were alive to see the terracotta orange bed and breakfast on Baylen Street named in her honor.

"Well do," "Lord have mercy," or some other "Oh my" expression of sorts that says without actually saying it—"All this for me?" Because the best people always question it.

There is no question whether Celestine Elizabeth Tolliver Harrison was deserving of the recognition by Cornelia, her brother, Gerald Robinson II, and her husband, Bronson Edwards, who brought the B&B to life. Born in Pensacola in 1908, Celestine was the matriarch of a family proud of its roots and heritage.

The B&B is also a tribute to Celestine's husband, Vandybilt, their five children—Jean, Lois, James, Mary and Horace—and every generation before and after, sharing with her the liquid thicker than water—stronger and more indelible, too.

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A retired antique piano immediately greets guests as they walk into the B&B—an homage to the one in Celestine's home; hers had shelves filled to the brim with family photos. All the bedrooms are named after Celestine's children and personalized accordingly. Even the logo is Celestine's authentic signature that Cornelia sourced from the back of one of Mary's school report cards.

Family reinforces every wall—figuratively and literally.

Easily everyone's favorite feature is the custom wallpaper along the stairwell that Cornelia carefully curated over the course of a year and a half (sans installation). In addition to hand-drawn illustrations of family photos, the wallpaper also features an image of the B&B, a tree still growing in the center of Seville Square, the clock outside the current Artel Gallery (formerly at the courthouse), the Bayfront Auditorium that used to reside at the end of Palafox Street and clippings from the Pensacola News Journal reporting the opening of Sacred Heart Hospital and 1960s

sit-ins opposing segregation. On it is also the tree from Celestine's former home on H Street.

"When we talk about family, family roots, family tree, limbs, branches, the leaves and creating something for somebody that you'll never necessarily get a chance to see, to experience, to appreciate, that's what (Celestine) did," Cornelia said.

Hardly a detail in the entire B&B escaped Cornelia and her family during the renovation and design process. Perfectionism may or may not be to blame. But that's kind of the point—they don't do missed opportunities.

"(If) you think about it in Pensacola, my aunt Mary, who's still living, my grandmother, who is still alive, my parents, who are still alive, they couldn't even go downtown to a department store and spend their hard-earned money; that was not a possibility for them," Cornelia said. "If opportunities are afforded to me because of them, why would I not take every advantage and walk through every door possible, even when I'm uncomfortable at times? ... UI-

timately, for me, that's what it's about, honoring the past and reflecting on where we are, and then moving forward and trying to do my part."

She still has more doors to walk through.

Pensacola Roots

If people are right, and it truly takes a village, Cornelia and Gerald certainly had one.

They grew up in a small-town version of Pensacola where everybody—no hyperbole—knew everybody.

Their immediate family lived on B Street first, then E Street next, with great-grandparents on H Street, a great-aunt and uncle on G Street, and grandparents on their father's side on I Street. And her parents might summon anyone in their alphabet soup to chauffeur them to their next ballet rehearsal or sports practice.

The proximity served them in support, always besting other students with the biggest—sometimes loudest—cheering section at concerts, games and graduations.

"There's also the time where you're like,



Deborah Robinson, Lois Christian & Mary Washington

"Hey, y'all tone it down," Cornelia said. "When you've got so many cheering, everyone knows you've arrived."

And one thing about their family, they always show up—and still do. Cornelia and Bronson had to postpone their interview for this story an hour to pay it forward at a cousin's talent show.

As a family unit, they're spiritual, celebratory, and there's always food, Cornelia said.

"Everyone is really generous, warm, caring; people work together," Cornelia said. "There's no, 'This is me. This is mine. And that's yours.' If one family member has, everybody has. If one family member's crying, we're all crying ... it's like a co-op."

Cornelia's grandmother, Lois, 91, believes faith is the backbone.

"We're all God's children, and we love each and every one," Lois said. "We have no problems with our family. Maybe one or two go astray, but they'll come back."

Their family and Pensacola grew up together. Cornelia can trace her Pensacola roots back to at least her fourth great-grandmother.

As a kid, she remembers buying a frozen cup from someone selling them for a quarter, stopping for a Krispy Kreme doughnut at a mere 35 cents, or grabbing a rainbow or smiley face cupcake from J's Bakery and Café—which still looks the same, she said.

Cornelia graduated from Booker T. Washington High School, majored in English at Spelman College (a women's HBCU in Atlanta) and went to law school at Vanderbilt University. She's lived in New York City, Washington, D.C. and Seattle.

The pandemic brought her home.

"There was almost this feeling of 'Why am I here?'" Cornelia said. "My family is on the East

Coast. My fiancé at the time was on the East Coast. It didn't make sense to be so far away from everybody."

Cornelia and Bronson met through Leadership Tomorrow, a leadership organization in Seattle, realizing they had parallel college experiences. They attended quasi-sibling universities at the same time in Atlanta; he went to Morehouse College.

"It was like we spoke the same language," Bronson said.

The first "big thing" at the bed and breakfast property was their wedding in October 2022.

"I'm new to the family, in a sense, but I don't feel like it," Bronson said. "It started at the top with her grandparents and great-grandparents, and they fed into now (with) her parents and now her and her brother. They've all opened their doors, literally, to the community. The word steward comes up."

They later celebrated Grandma Lois' 90th birthday on the B&B porch with a pandemic-appropriate drive-by party—Bronson leading the procession via motorcycle.

"She said, 'I've never had anything this nice. It's like a parade in my honor,'" Cornelia said.

The Bed & Breakfast

Cornelia and Gerald birthed the concept together.

Bronson wouldn't hesitate to use the word "birthed," because he's been talking about the thing like it's a baby, he said.

They purchased the property two-and-a-half years ago, opened it for guests in December of 2022 and spent every second in between renovating what Cornelia describes as a Victorian home that had been stripped of character—not unlike

many others in the neighborhood that have been developed into offices and things of that nature.

The brother-sister real estate duo has built a habit of honoring their family, naming several smaller properties in downtown Pensacola after loved ones—the Sherman house (grandfather), the Connie House (grandmother Cornelia's nickname), the Leonard house (uncle), the History house (a great-great-uncle's name is, in fact, History) and several more.

Their company goes by an address instead of a name, 117 Barcelona. It's the first known record of their family's homeownership in Pensacola. No home exists there today.

They didn't set out to open a bed and breakfast.

"It almost feels like we were guided to the creation of this vision," Cornelia said. "This property came on the market. My brother and I saw it sight unseen. I said, 'Hey, I want to look at that place. It could be a great bed and breakfast.'"

And the rest is (so much) history.

Who Is She?

So who was Celestine?

The answer is, of course, a lot of things. An only child. A checker at Gulf Cleaners in the Belmont-DeVilliers neighborhood. A server at Baptist Hospital. A kitchen stewardess and cashier at Escambia General Hospital. At night, an in-home care provider to children in the North Hill neighborhood.

Perhaps the most accurate, overarching label, though, is a giver.

Mary recalls a story in which a stranger knocked on the door, asking for appropriate attire to go to church. Celestine went inside with no hesitation, returning with one of Vandybilt's suits.

"Whether he went to church or not, I don't know," Mary said. "My dad came home—and he was a very giving person—he said, 'You gave him one of my suits?' My mom said, 'Yeah, because he needed to go to church.' And that was the end of that. My dad didn't get angry or anything; he just couldn't believe she gave away one of his only two suits."

Celestine often invited people from church over for dinner or welcomed overnight guests who needed a place to sleep. She'd shop sales all year long to make sure every loved one in her life had a present with his or her name on it come Christmastime.

Gerald, who only knew her as Grandma Harrison, describes her as a light to those she came in contact with.

"Her home was a place to congregate from sunup to sundown with delicious food, great conversations and a game show or two—and don't forget the 6 p.m. Channel 3 news," Gerald said.

"There was never a dull moment or a hungry stomach in the house. She was welcoming of all people from various walks of life. Through her, I learned to accept people for who they are. We hope to replicate a similar experience at the Celestine Bed and Breakfast."

Mary, who thinks of Cornelia and Gerald as her own children, is elated they named the B&B after her mother.

"I can't really put into words what this means to me and to other members of the family," Mary said. "My mom and dad didn't have a lot, but they always wanted property, to have their own house. They didn't have any college education or even finish high school; they didn't have the opportunity. But they were very smart. They taught us all to own a piece of

property, and here they are carrying that lesson into today."

When Mary first saw the custom wallpaper, she was screaming—and she's not a screamer.

"I was so taken aback with the beauty, time and thoughtfulness put into this whole thing," Mary said. "I said, 'I wish my mom and my dad could see it.' Somehow, I just believe their spirits are shouting joy."

"I was shocked," Lois said. "But then I wasn't. I know my granddaughter. From a little girl, whatever she set her heart to do, she'll do it 100%."

It meant a lot to Cornelia's and Gerald's mother, Deborah, too.

"My grandmother was the apple of my eye," Deborah said. "It embodies many of the characteristics she possesses. It has a warm and kind feeling that she also had."

House of History

What sets The Celestine B&B apart are the details, Bronson said.

They worked with family members and local antique dealers to procure every carefully thought-out interior piece carried through the doorway.

In the downstairs Vandybilt room are bookshelves adorned with books from the old Washington High School and Pine Forest High School, Cornelia's grandmother's degree from Spelman College (who she's named after), Sherman's diploma from Booker T. Washington High School (he later went on to be the principal and deputy school superintendent).

Another shelf holds a glass jar with the letter "R" on it that Cornelia's parents got when they married. Inside are antique matchbooks from some Pensacola restaurants that no longer exist, such as Skopelos when it was on the bay.

There's also an edition of "The Negro Motorist Green Book" on the shelf. A lot of people don't know what that is, Cornelia said.

"The concept with the Green Book was it told you where you were safe to go when you were on a road trip," Cornelia said. "You could look at the Green Book and say, 'OK, we can stop at this hotel or this motel, or eat at this restaurant. We're gonna be safe.'"

Nearby is a book to help children understand Green Books, too.

The room also boasts an 1885 map of Pensacola before the house was built in 1888 and chairs from the First Presbyterian Church. The original homeowner, James Simpson Reese, was a member of the church and a well-known banker, who went on to be president of The Citizen and Peoples National Bank of Pensacola and the Florida Bankers Association.

Intentionally next to Vandybilt's room is the Celestine room.

"One is masculine after my great-grandfather; this one is feminine," Cornelia said. "Those are pocket doors in between, so they actually work together. Both rooms work together, but they also stand on their own, just like our great-grandparents did."

The Horace room is dedicated to the U.S. Air Force veteran who was not only the first Black male to graduate from Pensacola High School but also a participant of the downtown lunch counter sit-ins—subsequently landing in jail at 15, alongside Mary, then 17. He was also president of NAACP's Youth League.

"It's interesting because he was a really quiet guy," Cornelia said. "You would never know his level of involvement in the Civil Rights movement. He was a doer, not a talker. In his later years, when February 23, 2023

I got a chance to know him, he was really kind, never met a stranger, really generous."

He loved to cook, too, Cornelia said. He'd come back with crab cakes from Biloxi and ensured their family gumbos were teeming with fresh fish.

Mary is one of the B&B's most popular rooms. She helped curate it herself.

"She was like, 'I want to stay in my room,'" Cornelia said.

And she did last weekend.

The James and Jean (J&J) suite is the largest.

"Jean lived to be 80," Cornelia said. "Even though she lived that long, she never in her entire life spent the night by herself in any house. It was only fitting we had a suite, so that James and Jean were together."

Deborah most loves the Lois room. Lois graduated from what is now Florida A&M University and was a nurse at Baptist Hospital, specializing in wound care.

"She's the kind of person who's really fancy and likes things unique," Deborah said. "That's my favorite room, because when I look at the room, I say, 'That's definitely my mom all the way.' She's 91, but she doesn't look 91; she doesn't act 91. She's sassy."

A Curated Experience

Celestine Bed and Breakfast is a marriage of the old and new.

Although there are four rooms available to book, guests aren't just there for sleep, Cornelia and Bronson explained. "We curate experiences," Cornelia said.

She and Bronson have traveled the world together, stepping foot on every continent except Antarctica—and that's on the list. They've integrated those cultures into their business model, starting with a welcome drink.

"At our favorite places in the world, when you arrive, you get a welcome drink," Cornelia said. "It's something small, but it makes people feel like, 'Oh, somebody really prepared for me to be here.'"

"The thing that's common among all folks, no matter where you are in the world, is food—cuisine—(and) music, it transcends," Bronson said. "So those are the types of things we've learned, and we want to ensure we create that experience here."

And don't sleep on the food. Cornelia puts a healthy amount of elbow grease into every meal, preparing many dishes from scratch.

"We take into account different things we've learned from different places, so it's a culinary gastronomic experience at times," Cornelia said. "Food is my love language ... and the guests clean their plates."

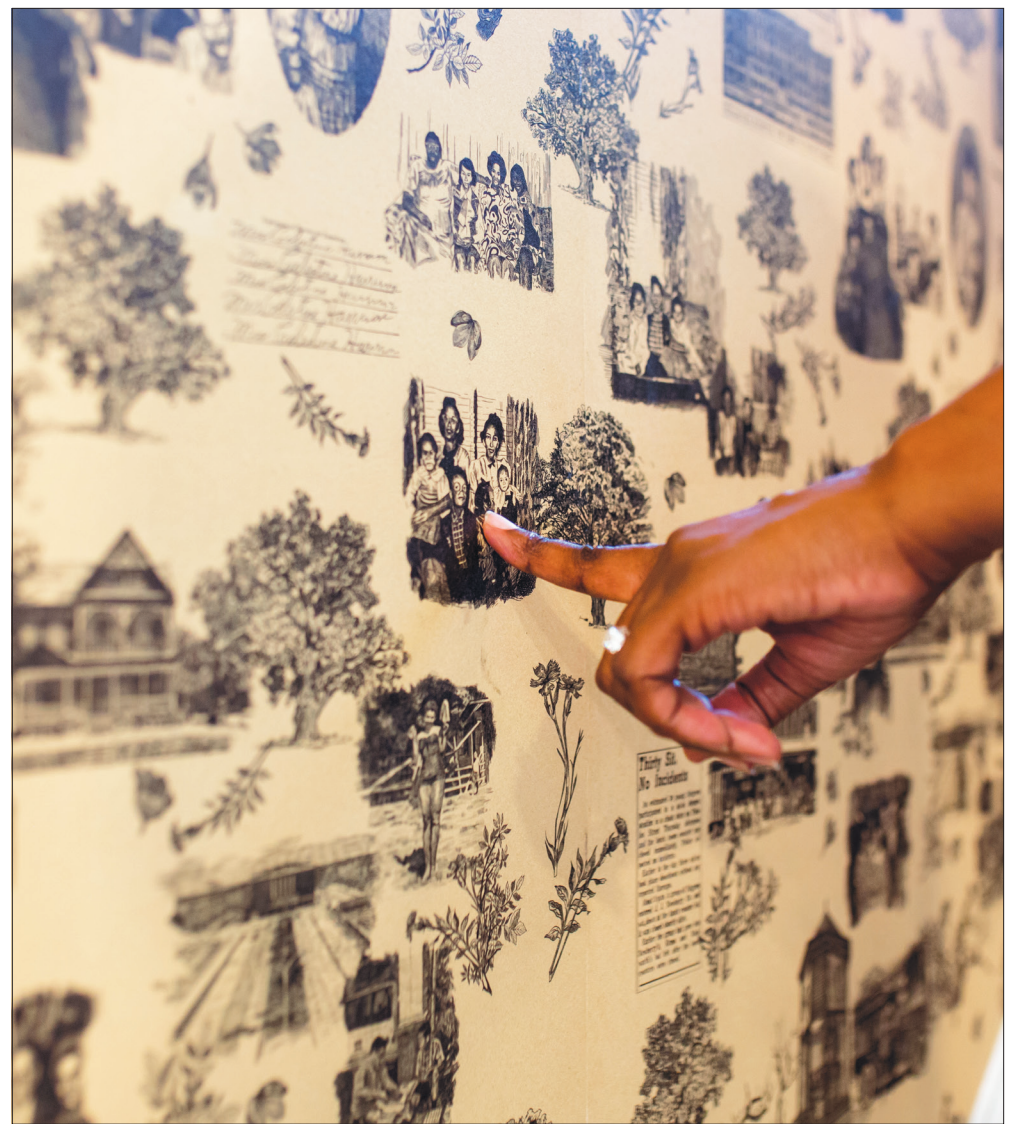
But they tend to get more from their guests than they give. Is it any surprise that these two love a good story?

One could lose weeks peeling back the layers of Celestine Bed and Breakfast, but Cornelia miraculously sums up the space, via a sitting area situated in a corner at the top of the stairs.

Sitting there in the present, she sees one wall covered in wallpaper that makes her think about the past. Looking ahead, she sees a blank wall.

"We don't know what the future holds," Cornelia said. "All we can do is prepare the next generation to paint this." **{in}**

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Celestine Bed and Breakfast's Custom Wallpaper



Lois Christian