

Eddie Bell: Renaissance Man

By Hope Yancey

Eddie Bell greets me at the door of his townhome wearing a Nelson Mandela T-shirt, a souvenir from travel in South Africa.

Ask Bell if anyone ever tells him he resembles the late Ed Bradley, a “60 Minutes” correspondent, and he smiles with recognition. People have stopped him on the street, he says.

Bell, 80, has been a higher education professional and advocate for students of color. He’s been a photographer capturing a wide-ranging array of subjects, including corporate executives, weddings and landscapes, as owner of Eddie’s Photo World. And he’s an accomplished poet. He and his wife, Mina, moved to Charlotte in 2013.

Bell believes advocacy for African American and Latino students has been among his most important achievements. A significant portion of his career was working at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where he was instrumental in a project for the recruitment, retention and support of African American and Puerto Rican students who didn’t have traditional college preparation, he says. Later programs built on this early project’s success.

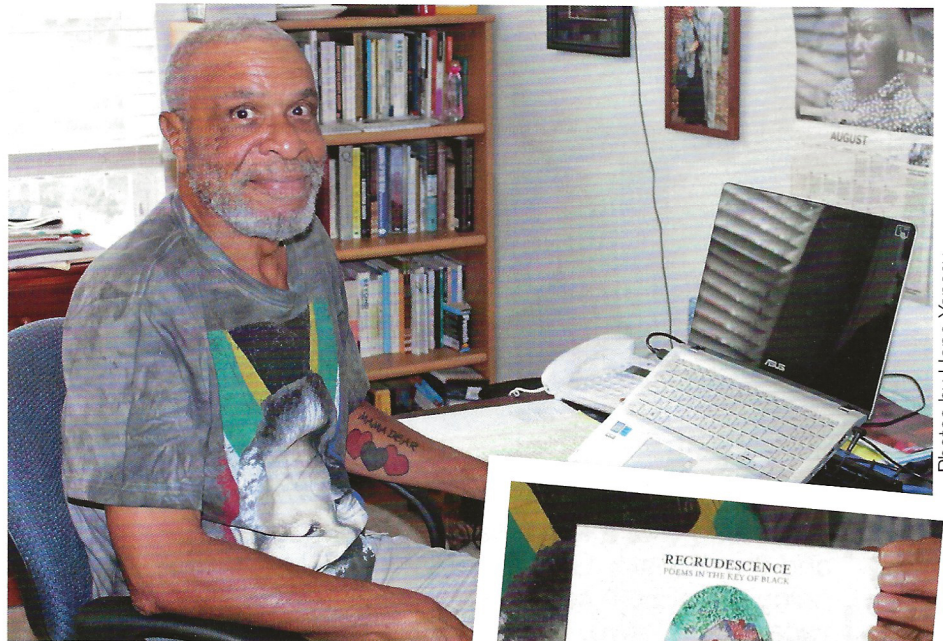
Tomas Morales, president of California State University, San Bernardino, has known Bell since 1971. Bell was an “extraordinary mentor to me,” Morales says in a phone interview. The two first met through SUNY New Paltz.

When Bell visited California to serve as poet-in-residence at CSU San Bernardino several years ago, he interacted closely with faculty and students, Morales says.

With ties to Illinois and New York, Bell spent many formative years in Queens, in a neighborhood populated with African American athletes and musicians. As a youth, he delivered newspapers to Roy Campanella, a catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. He shoveled snow for entertainer Lena Horne.

Bell hails from a talented family. His maternal grandmother, Juanita Carpenter Robinson, was a poet and helped raise him. He attributes his embrace of poetry to her. “I got it honest,” he says with a laugh.

His grandmother’s poems addressed diverse topics, including nature,



Photos by Hope Yancey

Above: Eddie Bell, an accomplished poet, photographer and retired higher education professional, poses at his writing desk in his south Charlotte home.

Right: Eddie Bell holds a copy of his new book, “Recrudescence: Poems in the Key of Black.” The title refers to his reconnection with poetry after stopping for a time.



gardening and friendship between races. She also wrote about opera singer Marian Anderson.

Bell’s birth mother, Elise Genevieve Robinson Bell, died of a heart attack at age 35. Bell was only two years old. His latest book, “Recrudescence: Poems in the Key of Black,” pays tribute to her. It was published in March 2019.

“I communicate my inner feelings and my emotions, and everything, through my writing and my poetry,” Bell says.

Bell’s father, Carl Bell, was a veteran of two world wars. Bell inherited his organizational skill and work ethic.

Carl remarried, and Bell gained a stepmother, Anna Lee Clay Bell. He thought of her as a “second mother,” he says.

Testifying to his affection for his birth mother and stepmother, Bell’s arm bears a tattoo of three interlocking hearts. The middle heart symbolizes him. Hearts on either side represent both mothers.

The words “Mama Dear” appear, as well. After his father’s death, he discovered

letters his birth mother wrote to his father. In one, she mentioned this was how a young Bell referred to her when he was a toddler. In a section of “Recrudescence,” he intersperses excerpts from her letters with his own writings.

For all the paths in his career, Bell cites creativity as the common denominator. “They call me a Renaissance man,” he says.

During Bill Clinton’s presidency, Bell wrote the White House about a lack of artwork there representative of African Americans, and sent his poem, “Side Streets.”

His outreach resulted in the White House purchasing a painting by artist Henry Ossawa Tanner, and an invitation for Bell to meet the Clintons. Tanner’s painting was the first by an African American to be in the White House’s permanent art collection. A photograph of Bell’s meeting with the Clintons hangs in Bell’s home. ■

Visit www.eddiebell.com to learn more.