

Monroe's Donuts and Bakery opens 5th location in Jackson

By Meredith C. McGee
Jackson Advocate Contributing Writer

Monroe Jackson says his baking talent is a blessing from God like the manna the Israelites ate when they were wandering in the desert.

He and his wife, Cindy, own Monroe's Donuts and Bakery. They opened their 5th location on Northbrook Street in North Jackson last month. The Monroe brand is striving well. Monroe and Cindy have been in business 19 of the 32 years of their marriage. "This September will mark our 20th business anniversary," Monroe said as if he was surprised after adding it up.

Like Monroe, Cindy is a general manager. "I don't bake," she noted. But, she oversees all of the stores, trains new hires, and maintains the records. Her husband is the main baker. "I have two bakers now, Monroe Jackson, Jr., and Calvin Bullock," Monroe stated.

Monroe and Cindy were raised in small towns and have a taste of city life. Cindy is a native of Hazlehurst, MS. Her family moved north in 1975. "I met Monroe in Chicago at a bakery near Hyde Park I use to patronize while working at the Food Basket," she recalled.

Monroe gives God the glory for his business success. He puts it this way, "God and us have five businesses." Monroe, who grew up with his poor family in the Mississippi Delta working from sun up to sun down for *kibbles and bits* said with a sense of pride, "We offer employees insurance, 401k plans, and paid vacation."

Lacresha Young, a Criminal Justice major at Hinds Community College, is a new hire. She said, "I get to work at 5:50 a.m. This location opens at 6 a.m. and closes at 12 noon." She added, "It's peaceful here. Mr. Monroe is hilarious. He always says 'good morning' when he delivers the pastries." Friday is their busiest day. "Local businesses buy dozens of donuts on Friday. We always sell out, restock and sell more," she said excitedly.

Monroe said one of the keys to having a good business is having loyal employees. Tieshia Brister, one of his ten employees, said, "He has a team behind him." Monroe added, "Good work ethics is important." Cindy joined the team full-time when they opened their 4th business location in the Capital Towers downtown. "I served Walmart for 23 years. It was time for me to give my husband 100 percent," she declared. After opening their 5th location, Cindy felt they had a lot of work ahead of them, and Monroe felt they could handle it because the Lord brought them this far.

Monroe learned the baking trade when he was a teenager in Chicago straight from the plantation fields in Holmes County, Mississippi; this skill



Monroe Jackson

has taken him beyond his wildest dreams. "I'm 57," Monroe said as a matter of fact. Yet, his work ethic and drive is unmatched in today's society. He fills in for employees who call in. His work day begins at 12 midnight and usually ends at 6 p.m. "God gets me up every day. I haven't missed a day baking or working,"



Cindy Jackson

he conferred. "If God's got something for you, you'll get it," he said reassuringly.

The business has come a long way from those days when Monroe baked sweets in his den and sold them to a small following of sweet lovers nearby. Pastries used to be delivered in Monroe Jackson's personal vehicle. Now they are delivered in *spanking brand new vans*.

"Let me tell you my story. I was born August 6, 1957. I come from a large family. We were poor. There were holes in our floor. When I

was nine years old, I saved my younger brother, Willie Earl, who was five, from a poisonous hissing snake," Monroe stated.

His story is about survival. According to Monroe, in the late 1960s, there were two ways a black woman could get housing on a plantation owned by a white man: date him, or have boys willing and able to work his land. His mother Earline moved her four boys, Lee, age 13; Monroe, age 9; John Henry, age 7; and Willie Earl, age 5, and her girls Alberta, and Shirley on a cotton plantation in Holmes County in the late 1960s.

He remembered one thing clearly about living in those woods, "At night it was pitch dark. You couldn't see nothing," he said.

"All of us worked out in the fields. I use to pick 200 pounds of cotton per day," he stated. They started working in the fields early in the morning. "I put my cotton in a 7-foot sack. At the end of the day, I sat on the ground, put my feet in the sack, and packed it down to make room for more cotton," he said. The children attended Lexington Attendance Center a few months during the year. They worked hard for low wages but managed to save \$500.00. The money was all in the little house near a pond with the holes in the floor. One day, a fire from the wooden stove got out of control, burned down the house, and the money went with it. That was a setback for them.

The Jacksons moved to Thornton on a sweet potato

farm on the outskirts of Tchula, Mississippi, into a nicer home, but they did not attend school. "My mother cannot read or write," he noted. "When you deny a race an education and money, that race is doomed," he declared.

Monroe left Mississippi when he was 16. "I moved with my uncle and aunt, Mark and Mamie Wilkes to 7936 S. Muskegon St. on the south side of Chicago. "My aunt worked at Fabers

started working that night at 12 a.m. He had to exchange three buses to get to work. The white bus driver would pass by Hoeffken's Bakery to let Monroe off the bus forcing Monroe to walk pass the tavern next door to the bakery.

One of the white men outside said, "Here comes that d--- n-----." They threw beer bottles at Monroe and taunted him every time he passed by. Hoeffken



Restaurant on Lasalle and Wabash downtown," he recalled. Monroe was hired on as a food runner delivering food to business patrons who worked in apartment buildings downtown.

"I'm telling you, it was God who led me to apply for a job as a porter at Hoeffken Bakery," Monroe said in an excited tone of voice. "I didn't even know what a porter was," he added. On his way home from work, Monroe, age 17, read the classified want ad in the *Suntimes* and he says God put his fingers on a porter job on the west side of the city.

"Blacks were not allowed to pass Western Ave. after 5 pm. I had to go to that side of Chicago to apply for a job," Monroe said in a serious tone of voice. When he walked through the door, Monroe was greeted by Raymond Hoeffken, a 75-year-old German man.

Hoeffken told Monroe, "Young man, I'm looking for a man to do this job," Monroe retorted, "Well sir, try me for a week, if you don't like me, you don't have pay me." Hoeffken couldn't argue Monroe's proposal. Monroe

always opened the door for employees; he realized his youngest worker who was a good, loyal employee was in danger. After working a month, Hoeffken informed Monroe, "I'm buying you a car." Monroe said excitedly, "He wrote a check to me for \$900! You hear me?" Monroe admitted Hoeffken changed my feeling about white men. "I once felt all white men were terrible," he declared.

Monroe didn't spend his money on fancy things. He used the public transit system, and sent \$75 to \$100 home a week to his mother. "In the early 1970s, my family moved to Yazoo City," he stated. His mother purchased a beautiful Jim Walton home at 320 S. Yazoo Street.

Monroe recalled his mother's world fell apart when his youngest brother, Willie Earl, was murdered before his 18th birthday by his white employer. "Willie Earl's boss pretended Willie Earl drowned while they were fishing," Monroe said. His sister Alberta identified his body and told authorities she suspected foul play because he had on dry clothes which were not the same clothes he left

home in. "That white man got away with murder, and mama left her home and moved to Kalamazoo with her sister Ma' Lee. Like the family's \$500 which burned in the house fire, the home investment was lost, too. "We couldn't afford to have an autopsy performed. There was no investigation; we buried Willie Earl, grieved and went on," Monroe noted.

Monroe worked long hours when he was a field hand, and he works long hours now as a business proprietor. "My work ethic, a good product, and God has helped our business survive," Monroe stated. Their company logo has played a large role in branding the business. A local artist, Lawrence Savage, who has presented his art at the White House to President Obama, drew their logo design. "Monroe told Savage, "Take my driver's license, put my face in a donut, point one finger up, and draw me a logo." That did it. The logo was created.

Like Mr. Hoeffken, Monroe tastes his products before they go out of the store. Monroe is hands on. As a baker he is a perfectionist. He's rigid, dedicated, and serious minded. Company patrons had to go to the Highway 49 location for years. Today, the company is in Ridgeland on Rice Road, in Jackson on Hwy. 49 S. (6am-6pm); on McDowell Road (6am-6pm); Northbrook Street (6am-6pm); and in the Capital Towers on Congress Street downtown (6am-noon).

Monroe Jackson, Sr., added inventor to his resumé too. He invented an Elastic Waist Hands Free Zip-up Apron which he wears, and which has improved his baking experience.



Patron O.J. Craft and Lacresha Young