

Nathaniel Stembridge, DECATUR, GA

Nathaniel Stembridge, 62, school custodian
Kay Powell - Staff - Atlanta Journal-Constitution
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Nathaniel Stembridge knew every child at Atlanta Speech School as well as he did every pipe, light or wire.

For 46 years, Mr. Stembridge, 62, of Decatur worked at the school in housekeeping and on the kitchen staff. He held a deep affection for the school and its students far beyond his custodial duties.

"We're a school about communication, and he connected with the students. When he was talking to you, you knew you counted to him," said the school's executive director, Comer Yates.

Former students who returned to the school sought Mr. Stembridge out. They may have grown a foot and changed from a child to a teenager or an adult, but he always recognized them and called them by name.

"He paid that kind of attention," said Mr. Yates.

The funeral for Mr. Stembridge, who died of kidney failure Thursday at DeKalb Medical Center, is at 1 p.m. today at Greenforest Baptist Church. Gregory B. Levett & Sons Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.

Atlanta Speech School teaches children with learning disabilities, the deaf and hearing impaired. Though many students couldn't understand the words Mr. Stembridge was saying to them, they knew what he meant, said Mr. Yates. He always had time for students and made them feel special.

"We talk about trusting, caring relationships and try to teach our students about them. He was the perfect role model for that," said Mr. Yates. "We try to be a place for children, a place of trust, a place of safety and respect, and Nathaniel just represented those qualities so, so well here. He communicated that to the children."

Though he did not have to be at school until 7:30 a.m., Mr. Stembridge arrived at 6 a.m. to put on coffee and have everything ready for the faculty and students, said his sister, Eve Lawson of Atlanta, who has worked at the school for 20 years.

"Anything that went wrong at that school, he would know. He knew every plumbing pipe and every light, every wire. He knew where every water line was," she said.

"He seemed to have eyes and ears everywhere," Mr. Yates said.

"He was a very, very, very good man not only to me but to the whole neighborhood," said his neighbor of 17 years, Diane McWhorter. "Every time he

mowed his lawn, he mowed mine. He'd fix things at my house that I didn't even know were broken. He watched over us. He will be well and truly missed."

Survivors include his wife, Gennive Stembridge; three sons, Nathaniel Stembridge of Union City, Chris Stembridge of Atlanta and Darrell Stembridge of Winder; a daughter, Kim Stembridge of Atlanta; his mother, Ethel Stembridge of Sparta; three other sisters, Lula Mae Robbins of Sparta, and Shirley Cooper and Leola Brewer, both of Atlanta; three brothers, Joseph Stembridge of Atlanta, Oblee Stembridge of Detroit and Adam Stembridge of Sparta; and five grandchildren.