

# Business owner credits Rosa Parks for opening doors

By MELANIE LEMAY

MONTGOMERY — Caring for others has been the common thread in the fabric of Isaiah Sankey's life.

From an Army operating room to a restaurant kitchen to the Victorian parlor of a bed & breakfast inn, Sankey has made his living by taking care of people.

Surely this Montgomery child was destined to be special. On the very day Sankey's mother was giving birth to him, Rosa Parks was making history across town by refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus. "Dec. 1, 1955," Sankey said, shaking his head. "You can see why I'm proud of my birthday. They always called me the Civil Rights baby."

Almost 50 years later, Sankey symbolizes both the strides made by blacks in Montgomery, and the obstacles yet to conquer. He has earned both bachelor's and master's degrees from Troy University and is a certified nurse practitioner. He's a successful entrepreneur, with his own home health care company, restaurant and bed and breakfast inn.

On the other hand, Sankey said he still faces racial obstacles. For example, he said it's still difficult for blacks to break into home health care in Alabama. "Because of restrictions around the Certificate of Need requirements in this state, our health care company, New Visions Nursing Service, can't participate as a Medicare provider," Sankey said. He's convinced those restrictions remain in place to protect the status quo.

Sankey has worked around the problem with wife and co-owner Johnnie, who is also a nurse practitioner. Today they provide home health care through various local agencies, and after more than 10 years in business, employ 70 full and part-time staff.

Several years ago, Sankey said an off-hand remark from a lawyer friend started him thinking in a new direction. "She told me, 'Isaiah, you ought to stop taking care of the sick and the lame and start feeding the hungry!' That made me stop and think. My wife had always loved to cook, and she loved to entertain. The more people we had over to eat, the better she liked it. And the more they ate, the happier she got. Why couldn't we parlay that into a successful business?"

## ISAIAH SANKEY

**Title:** Owner of home health care company, restaurant and bed and breakfast inn  
**Age:** 49  
**Family:** Wife and business partner: Johnnie; 2 sons  
**Education:** Bachelor's and master's degrees from Troy University; certified nurse practitioner



Isaiah Sankey owns a restaurant called Isaiah's, Butterfly Inn Bed and Breakfast and a home health care company called New Visions Nursing Service.

They did exactly that, opening a spacious, sunny restaurant on the corner of Mildred and Halcolombe streets in Montgomery. They called it Isaiah's.

Today, while Johnnie supervises the cooking staff and puts the finishing touches on her signature peach cobbler, Sankey bustles from kitchen to dining room, answering the phone and booking reservations for civic groups and birthday parties. "People who have restaurants think I'm crazy for taking on something that's so much work," he said, "because the hard work really only starts when the customers walk out the door every day."

"But I enjoy it. It's really just an extension of caring for people. I like to say that nursing is my first love, and this restaurant is my hobby."

Like any avid hobbyist, Sankey is honing his skills, mastering the meat smoker and learning to put together a sweet potato pie that maybe even rivals Johnnie's. With all those hours in front of the stove, how does he manage to run two very different businesses?

He smiles. "You just have to remember which phone is ringing."

Two years ago, Sankey saw a way to expand the restaurant's services and take care of people in a new way. He and Johnnie opened the Butterfly Inn Bed and Breakfast next door to Isaiah's. They advertise it as "the

first African-American-owned B&B in Montgomery," and with its homey atmosphere and proximity to good food, the Butterfly Inn has established a good reputation with visitors to the city.

The Sankeys frequently host groups in town for Civil Rights commemorative events or Alabama State University football games.

Sankey said the inn has welcomed guests from as far away as England and Italy, along with a fair number of military officers, including a one-star general. "We were privileged to provide lodging for the evacuated family of a serviceman after Hurricane Katrina," Sankey said, "and so many military people stopped by Isaiah's to have lunch and thank us for that."

The staff said Sankey perks up whenever he sees a uniform, and this retired Army captain says it's true. "I was in the Army twice. First as an enlisted soldier, and then as a commissioned officer in the Army Nurse Corps. I was an operating room nurse." He served most of his time at Fort Bragg, but also spent some time at Fort McClellan in Anniston.

After retiring from the Army, Sankey worked for the state, traveling throughout Alabama with Medicaid's EPSDT program. He made sure local agencies and medical facilities knew about the preventive care program, which promoted proper immunizations and nutrition for children and adolescents.

A larger goal always hovered on the periphery, though. "I had a burning desire to have my own business," Sankey said. "I had a spirit of excellence as far as my work and my patients were concerned, and if I were going to put that much time and effort into something, I figured it might as well be my own business."

No doubt Sankey succeeded, in part, because of the decision a fellow Montgomery woman made on the very day he was born. He remembers having to use the colored bathroom downstairs at the H. L. Green dime store and having to eat his hot dog downstairs at the Kress store. "But that's the way it always was when I was a child, and I accepted it at the time," he said. "I had no idea things would be changing."

Melanie LeMay is a freelance writer based in Montgomery