As the founder and CEO of the Trumpet Awards, which pays tribute to African-American achievement, Clayton touts her greatest achievement as being “able to see the beauty in people and appreciate the joys of their lives

By KENYA KING
Special to the NNPA from Atlanta Daily World

Just 10 days after her 81st birthday, Xernona Clayton received a gift of a lifetime, becoming the first African- American woman to have a downtown Atlanta street named after her as well as a park plaza dedicated in her name.

Mayor Kasim Reed and the City of Atlanta honored Clayton, a civil rights and broadcasting trailblazer, recently, with dozens of civil leaders, supporters and well-wishers looking on.

Clayton stood with tears in her eyes as the street sign was unveiled. “I feel so special for this moment,” said Clayton. “I consider this another blessing, something I didn’t seek. So that makes the honor twice as good.”

Baker Street is now also called Honorary Xernona Clayton Way.

In addition to the street naming, the city of Atlanta unveiled a plaque in Hardy Ivy Park, naming the space Xernona Clayton Plaza.

After many months of uncertainty of whether the street naming would come to fruition due to some who opposed recognizing individuals with street names, a resolution was finally reached.

“I felt very badly about it because I prefer not to be involved in controversy and it was not an honor I was seeking, and it kind of went down in defeat. They put it on hold and it stayed on hold. Well, what I didn’t know was that the council members were looking for an alternate plan. And there’s a lesson to me in this blessing. I call this a blessing, but there’s a lesson. Cone Street is about three or four blocks long. The alternate choice was Baker Street, which is twice as long.

To me the lesson in this wonderful blessing is – I think there is a biblical reference to it that says, ‘fret not over that which you lose, but glory in that which you gain.’ And so I was fretting over what I was considering a loss, but look at what I gained – a longer street and a park,” said Clayton.

Clayton said that she’s read that Hardy Ivy, who is credited as Atlanta’s first settler, designated Baker Street as the “heart of Atlanta,” that the city would grow from there.

In Hardy Ivy Park, where her plaza is named, Clayton plans to utilize the space to recognize others who have made contributions to the community. “I am going to create a spot of honor for other people. It’s a lovely area there… I can put lighted bricks [there] and talk about the nights of lights – people who are helping to illuminate and augment the glory of our city, people who are helping to do something wonderful for others. I don’t know how to accept this because I’m overjoyed with the opportunity to take what has been given to me and return it to bigger and better opportunities,” said Clayton.

Clayton, who worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and traveled with Mrs. King during her concert tours, said that Dr. King would be pleased with the street renaming.

“Oh, I think he would feel as proud of the event as I am because he also would not seek honor for himself. …So when you lived around him and worked around him and observed him, it really rubs off and becomes a real part of you but I already kind of had that spirit because my father kind of started in me at an early age, but he kind of magnified it and confirmed, and re-affirmed that spirit. I think he would be very pleased of this day to now have me in the heart of Atlanta, because he knows that that’s where my heart is. That my heart is in the right place because I want to take what I have and make it work for others. I mean that so sincerely,” said Clayton.

Clayton made history in 1967 when she became the host of her own television show, “The Xernona Clayton Show,” which was one of the most popular shows in the South and a first by any African American.

Ted Turner, founder of Turner Broadcasting System, for whom Clayton worked for 30 years, gave Clayton the opportunity. “Ted Turner just believed in me and gave me assignments that I would have never chosen,” said Clayton.

As the founder and CEO of the Trumpet Awards, which pays tribute to African-American achievement, Clayton touts her greatest achievement as being “able to see the beauty in people and appreciate the joys of their lives and learn from the lessons of their blessings.”

Clayton will celebrate the Trumpet Awards’ 20th anniversary in January and admits she’s going to “add a little spice to it” as well as bring back past award recipients. She said the awards have inspired others to follow in the footsteps of those she has honored.

Clayton hopes to continue giving back and reaching out to the community through her one-woman show about her life’s experiences, which she plans to resume in the near future. Thus far, she’s performed the show seven times, including shows in Kansas City, New York and the Bahamas.

If her history-making street naming and park dedication are any indications, Clayton’s legacy will be one long remembered for many generations to come.