



Singing unto the Lord



BY DARREN WHITE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH JOHNSON

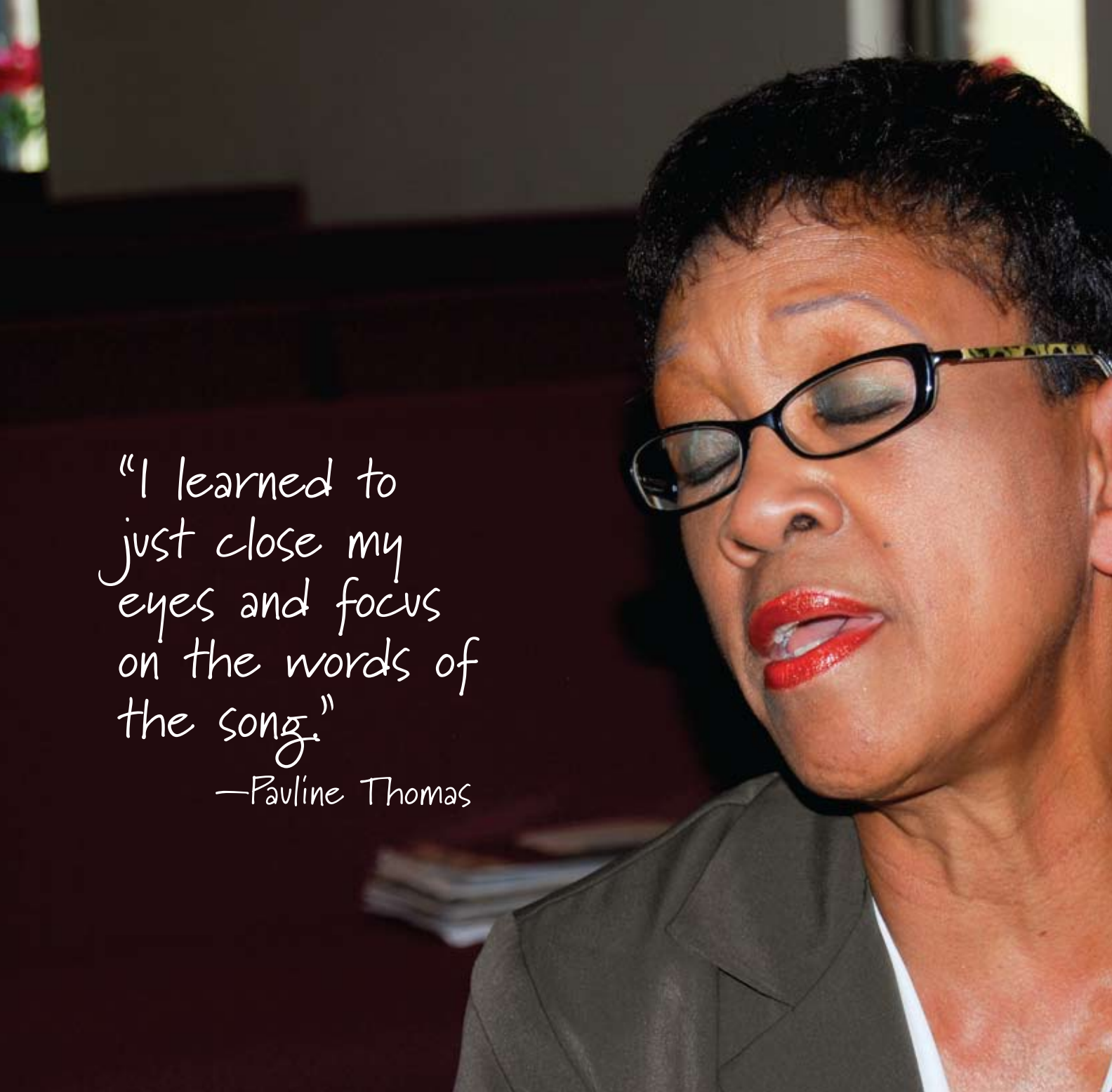
Pauline Thomas divides her music ministry between two Weatherford churches

It's little more than half a mile from New Hope Baptist Church to Prince Memorial CME. About 10:45 a.m. every Sunday, Pauline Thomas leaves New Hope, where she is a member, after Sunday school to play piano and lead the choir at Prince Memorial.

She's been driving that half-mile for 10 years. She doesn't expect to stop any time soon.

Thomas wakes up at 6:30 a.m. March 29, and like many Sundays before, arrives in the main sanctuary of New Hope a little before 9:30 a.m. She helps take, count and record tithes and offerings at church, and before the Sunday school class starts, churchgoers pass cash and checks to her. A small boombox plays contemporary Christian songs.

Jeff Brazzell, superintendent of Sunday schools, switches the boombox to "Touch the Hem of His Garment," by the Soul Stirrers, the classic gospel group fronted by Sam Cooke in the late '50s. The music signals a shift in the room's mood. The churchgoers are ready to worship.



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—Pauline Thomas

Thomas stands up from her seat near the middle and walks to the piano at the front. Until now, she's been mostly quiet, save for polite conversation with a few churchgoers. And then, she sings.

The song is "O How I Love Jesus," and her voice is indescribably sublime, rich with emotion and nuance. She plays the piano notes declaratively, using grace notes between the chords.

With her words and her fingers, she is offering the song into the highest reaches of heaven.

"You wouldn't know from talking to her that she has that voice inside her," Brazzell says. "She is so modest—she's not seeking any fame."

Thomas is often reserved in public, but her voice is incredibly expressive.

Thomas, who turns 64 this July, is dressed in a red jacket. She's quiet and dignified. She says she used to get nervous when she performed in front of people.

"I learned to just close my eyes and focus on the words of the song," she says.

She returns to her seat for the lesson, a passage from Ezekiel.



Patrick Jefferson, a New Hope churchgoer, teaches the lesson, and he encourages the 12 or so people in the room to comment. Thomas doesn't talk, but she takes detailed notes and nods her head when Jefferson or a classmate says something she agrees with.

She sneaks out of the class at 10:45 a.m. As I'm getting in my car to follow her to Prince