

Sylvester Owens, Olympic star's sibling

OWENS

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MAYFIELD HEIGHTS — Sylvester Owens, 96, a photographer and custodial worker in Cleveland schools, died Sunday at his home in Mayfield Heights. He was the last surviving sibling of Olympic champion Jesse Owens, who had nine brothers and sisters.

Owens was born in tiny Oakville, Ala., where his parents were sharecroppers. He retained childhood memories of working in the fields and sleeping on the floor of their cabin until the family moved to Cleveland when he was 9, according to news stories. He left Central High School to work for a steel company after his father was injured in a car accident.

"I had my mom and dad and Jesse and two sisters to take care of," he told an interviewer years later.

Owens became a boiler engineer and was an elementary school custodian. His friend,

Frances Stephens, said he kept food in his refrigerator on the job to give to needy children who had not been fed before they came to school.

He married Julia Russell in 1934. They were members of St. James A.M.E. Church for more than 50 years. They lived in California and Arizona for a time and were Euclid residents when his wife died in 1990.

Owens did not compete in athletics, but he took enormous pride in the accomplishments of his kid brother who equaled world track records while a student at East Technical High School and earned four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics.

He went to Oakville, Ala., for the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum dedication in 1997. The next year, he told The Plain Dealer: "I can truthfully say the attention he received never affected him for one minute. He still treated everyone the



same."

Owens was also a guest of honor when the Jesse Owens postage stamp was unveiled in Cleveland in 1998.

He was a member of the Karamu Camera Club for many years and traveled to many cities on club excursions.

After his wife's death, Owens resumed a friendship with Stephens, whom he had not seen since they were classmates. They traveled to Jerusalem, Africa and Europe. When his health began to fail in 2000, she became his caregiver.

No immediate family members survive.

A memorial service will be at 2 p.m. Friday at St. James A.M.E. Church, 8401 Cedar Ave., Cleveland.

Arrangements are by the E.F. Boyd & Son Funeral Home of Cleveland.



SYLVESTER MICHAEL OWENS, age 96. Departed June 19, 2005. Brother of the late great Olympic champion Jessie Owens; beloved companion of Frances Stephens. Graveside service Friday July 1, 2005 1:00 p.m. at Highland Park Cemetery followed by memorial service 2:00 p.m. at St. James AME Church, 8401 Cedar Ave. Arrangements entrusted to E.F. BOYD & SON FUNERAL HOME, 2165 EAST 89th STREET.

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