



Reverend Nathaniel "Nature Boy" James

February 20, 1943 - January 21, 2026

Born and raised in Bartow, Florida, Pastor Nathaniel "Nature Boy" James was a man of deep faith, strong family values, and a heart for service. As the beloved son of the late Freddie and Ruth James, he was raised with guiding principles that shaped his life and legacy. He graduated from Union Academy High School in 1964 and went on to pursue higher education at Florida A&M University (FAMU) in Tallahassee, Florida, where he earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Education in 1968. He later continued his religious studies at the International Bible Seminary, where he received his Degree of Divinity in Homiletics in 1987.

While at FAMU, Pastor James excelled both academically and athletically, becoming a standout football and track star. It was also during this time that he met Gwendolyn Manigault, the love of his life. What began as a college romance blossomed into a beautiful, lifelong partnership. Together, they shared more than 59 years of marriage, building a life rooted in faith, love, and unwavering commitment.

Nathaniel's athletic talent led him to the NFL, where he played for the Cleveland Browns and the New Orleans Saints, before continuing his professional career with the Montreal Alouettes in the Canadian Football League. Over the years, he was honored with induction into multiple Hall of Fame programs, including the Florida A&M University Hall of Fame for his

exceptional contributions to football and track & field; the Track & Field Hall of Fame for his performance in the Penn Relays; and the Union Academy Hall of Fame for his accomplishments as an elite athlete.

Yet beyond sports and recognition, it was Pastor James' faith that truly guided his life and shaped his purpose. That strong foundation led him toward a lifelong commitment to service and leadership. For 33 years, he faithfully served the Orange County Public School System as a teacher and coach, impacting countless students and mentoring generations of young athletes. Many of those relationships remained strong over the years, as former students continued to express gratitude for the wisdom, discipline, and care he poured into their lives.

During this time, Nathaniel also answered the call to ministry, delivering his first sermon at St. John Independent Free Methodist Church. His passion for the Word and love for people only grew stronger, and in 1986, he became the Senior Pastor of St. Luke Free Methodist Church in Orange Bend, Florida. With a gentle spirit, steady leadership, and a compassionate heart, Pastor James dedicated decades to encouraging others, strengthening families, and serving his community through the love of Christ.

Pastor Nathaniel James leaves behind a legacy of strength, service, faith, and love. He shared 59 wonderful years of marriage with his beloved wife, Gwendolyn James, who preceded him in death. He is survived by: his children, Nathaniel Gregory James (Kim) of Altamonte Springs, Florida; Neill James of Maitland, Florida; and Nicholas James (Jennifer) of Apopka, Florida. He is also survived by: his beloved brother, Freddie James of Miami, Florida; sister-in-law, Claudia Jean Hires (Eddison); and brothers-in-law, Claudius Manigault, Jr. of Longwood, Florida, and John (Faye) Manigault of Longwood, Florida.

His legacy continues through his grandchildren, NaTasha James, Arielle Young (Chris), Nicole James, NaKayla James, Gregory James, Shayla James, Karter James, Ky'Elle James, Nia James, and Jordan James; and three great-grandchildren, Reyelle Sands, Dequarius Harper, and Reythaniel Sands.

He is also survived by a host of nieces, nephews, cousins, and cherished church family members who loved him dearly and will continue to carry his spirit forward. Pastor Nathaniel James lived a life marked by faith, family, and unwavering dedication to serving others. His impact will be felt for generations to come.

Cemetery Details

Tavares Cemetery

2055 Dead River Road
Tavares, FL 32778

Previous Events

Visitation

FEB 6. 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Independent Free Methodist Church Headquarters
1151 Pamela Street
Leesburg, FL 34748

Service

FEB 7. 11:00 AM (ET)

Independent Free Methodist Church Headquarters
1151 Pamela Street
Leesburg, FL 34748

Tribute Wall

NE

“ I miss you Dad, love you so much give Mom a big Kiss and a Hug.

Neill - March 20 at 11:44 AM

SH

“ It was indeed a pleasure attending FAMU with “Nature Boy”. He was a wonderful guy with lots of WISDOM! In later years when he and the track team would return to “The Hill” for the different sports events, they always visited me on my front porch. Sitting in my rockers, they made the porch look like a senior citizen home. 🥰 I looked forward to that. It was a loving sight to behold as my children watched

“Nature Boy” and the track team being honored at the 2020 Penn State relays. Thanks for the good memories. See ya later Rev.

Nathaniel “Nature

Boy” James.

From: Barrie, Sheena & Peter

Ashcroft 🍷 🕊 🕊

Sheena Hamilton - February 06 at 05:24 PM

DR

“ Darlene Rolle lit a candle in memory of Reverend Nathaniel “Nature Boy” James



Darlene Rolle - February 04 at 03:46 PM

ZS

“ To the family,

We are holding you all in our thoughts and prayers during this time of loss. “Nature Boy,” as we affectionally call him, was more than just a teammate to us, but part of the brotherhood of FAMU Rattler gridlers in the truest sense. We shed blood, sweat, and tears together, pushed each other, laughed hard, and grew up side by side. Those memories are stamped in our lives forever, and we are grateful for every one of them.

What stood out most about “Nature Boy” was not just how he performed on the track and gridiron, but how he lived—his loyalty, his heart, and the way he made people around him better. That is the legacy he leaves with us, and with so many others whose lives he touched.

May God surround you with strength, peace, and the quiet comfort that comes from knowing “Nature Boy.” His legacy lives on in all of us who knew him. May the love you shared with him carry you through the days ahead.

With heartfelt sympathy,

Lester Brown

Eddie Cooper

John Eason

Richard Ford

George Jackson

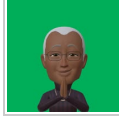
Herman Jackson

Joe Musgray

Frank Pinckney

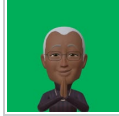
Zeke Sims

Zeke Sims - January 28 at 01:16 PM



Hubba, Hubba Team Captain Eddie Cooper

Eddie Cooper - January 28 at 09:38 PM



Hubba, Hubba Team Captain Eddie Cooper

Eddie Cooper - January 28 at 09:40 PM



“ *Gladys Carr Blalock lit a candle in memory of Reverend Nathaniel "Nature Boy" James*



Gladys Carr Blalock - January 28 at 03:13 AM

TM

“ During the many years that I knew Nathaniel James at Union Academy and Florida A& M University, I found him to be a kind-hearted fellow -student with a big smile and a bigger heart. He was a standout athlete in track and field and football in high school and FAMU. Throughout his life, Nate was incredibly humble, even during his heyday! He remained loyal to his friends and beloved wife. When I last saw Nathaniel James at our Union Academy High School Reunion, he was in a wheelchair, a shadow of his former self. In his own way of kidding, he announced to me that I didn't know who he was. I quickly quipped, “Of course I do. You are Major Hazelton”! For a brief moment, he looked uncertain, and then we all broke out into laughter. Friends and jostled him decrying , “She got you!”!

Nathaniel was a gentle giant, a protector of women, an honorable family man and a Man of God! At one of our class reunions, Nathaniel delivered a sermon on “Dry Bones”. There I saw his passion and faith in God in real time. Nathaniel James lived a good life and fought the good fight. He now resides with the Lord in Paradise.

Classmate, Terrye Mosley

Terrye Mosley - January 27 at 03:56 PM

GG

I played with Nathaniel “nature boy” James in high school. I was three years behind him, so he was one of those guys I looked up to as an inspiration. I last saw him Major funeral and now that dynamic duo are up there with the Lord running and playing together.

George Grace - January 28 at 02:57 PM

JC

“ *Jacqueline Cotman lit a candle in memory of Nathaniel James*



Jacqueline Cotman - January 27 at 02:50 PM

TD

“ *A Virtual gift was sent in memory of Reverend Nathaniel "nature Boy" James*



Terric Durden - January 27 at 01:43 PM

DN

“ *Dot Newsome lit a candle in memory of Reverend Nathaniel "Nature Boy" James*



Dot Newsome - January 26 at 08:27 PM

TD

“ *Terric Durden Lit a candle in memory of Reverend Nathaniel "Nature Boy" James*



Terric Durden - January 26 at 08:05 PM