A living lesson in determination

National award honors Alferd Williams, 71, who is now in third grade at a St. Joseph school.

The Associated Press

ST. JOSEPH | The 71-year-old son of a sharecropper, Alferd Williams is now a third-grader and has his own reasons for working hard in school.

“I don’t have a mother living, and I don’t have a father living, so it’s up to me how long I go to school and how well I learn,” Williams told a gymnasium packed with fellow students at Edison Elementary School.

Williams returned to first grade in St. Joseph when he was 68 because what he wanted most of all was to learn to read.

He’s in the third grade now at Edison, where he was honored Wednesday by the national Toys for Tots Literacy Program with the first Alferd Williams Literacy Award.

He accepted the award clad in jeans festooned with Fat Albert characters and a white T-shirt. He told the crowd that no matter how old, everyone has some kid in them.

His first-grade teacher, Alecia Hamilton, also received the award. The two have received much national attention for Williams’ efforts, including being on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and in People magazine.

“What we have to realize as a nation is there are 34 million adults in this country at the level Alferd was when he came into this school, and we really must do more to help them,” said Sharon Darling, president and founder of the national Center for Family Literacy.

The Toys for Tots Literacy Program provides disadvantaged children with books and other materials. It’s part of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program.

Williams said that despite his age, school is so important to him that he plans to remain a student for “the rest of my life.”