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Game changed Gallatin



Bill Ligon (left) and Eddie Sherlin reminisce over coffee and old yearbooks. Later this month Nashville-based production company ACT 2 Communications will produce a documentary about their friendship and overcoming racial tension in Gallatin. Photo By Jennifer Easton/For The News Examiner

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For The News Examiner

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They weren't looking to move mountains or change the world, only to win a basketball game.

Thirty-seven years later, the true story of one historic basketball game played on Feb. 28, 1970, between white Gallatin High School and all black Union High School will be told in a documentary to be filmed in Gallatin with the working title "Cross Court."

ACT 2 Communications, a Nashville based full-service media production company, has purchased the rights to

tell the story of hometown heroes Eddie Sherlin and Bill Ligon, who played in that historic basketball game and helped unite a town into a community.

"The big goal is to make this into a major narrative feature film about the life of Eddie Sherlin and Bill Ligon in Gallatin, and to tell the story of racial tensions leading up to that one game," said Kevin Shaw, a New York-based director and screenwriter.

Shaw, who has produced several award-winning films and documentaries for ESPN, ABC, NBC and PBS, has teamed with ACT 2 Communications to produce the documentary.

Same town, two worlds

The story is significant because Sherlin and Ligon grew up one street apart from each other in one town, but two different worlds.

Although the U. S. Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954 signaled Southern schools to desegregate, full integration wasn't required in Sumner County or much of Middle Tennessee until 1970.

Sherlin and Ligon grew up in the rural, segregated Gallatin of the 1960s that meant different schools and less opportunity for African-Americans.

"We were taught to be 10 times better than anybody at everything," said Ligon.

The story begins in 1963 when Sherlin moved to Gallatin with his family. He was in the fourth grade, and because both of his parents worked, Sherlin and his brother, Jimmy, spent their afternoons playing sports or walking around town.

"I especially loved basketball," said Sherlin. "I lived on Morrison Street, which was one street over from what was considered the black part of town."

"Back then, black people lived on either Smith, Bledsoe or Winchester streets," said Ligon, whose family lived on Winchester.

One day while Sherlin was walking to town down Bledsoe, he spotted the neighborhood children playing basketball in an empty lot and asked if he could join.

Seeking footage, information

Filmmakers are seeking 8mm film that may have been shot by the public of Union or Gallatin basketball games. In addition, they are searching for footage of Gallatin places or events from the 1960s or very early 1970s.

If the public has a story or personal pictures or other memorabilia that they would like to share relating to the project or the basketball game played by Union and Gallatin high schools in Springfield on Feb. 28, 1970, contact ACT 2 Communications at (615) 370-2852 or visit www.act2inc.com to share stories.

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"I really don't know if they were surprised that a white kid asked to play with them or if they thought it would be fun to pick on me. But they quickly accepted me because they saw that I could play," said Sherlin.

"After that, we played basketball like that every afternoon until junior high," said Sherlin. "Those are some of my best memories."

One of those children, Ligon, was the same age as Sherlin, and the two formed a close friendship that crossed the color barrier.

"I didn't care that he was black and I don't think he cared that I was white. Bill was just my friend," said Sherlin.

Segregated schools meant separating organized sports and sites for athletic competition, too. Blacks and whites rarely played against each other in the South in the 1960s. With few exceptions, organized sports in Gallatin were segregated.

When Sherlin and Ligon began playing team sports for their segregated junior high schools, they saw each other less and less until eventually, they lost touch. They kept up with each other by reading local newspaper articles on the other's achievements.

"In those days, the local papers gave a lot less coverage to Union and black athletes," said Sherlin.

Although Sherlin and Ligon went their separate ways, they seemed to be living parallel lives.

Both young men were star athletes at their high schools — excelling in football, basketball and baseball. Both achieved academic successes. Both were popular and well liked; and in their senior year, both were elected class president.

Union, Gallatin finally meet

In the winter of 1970, both young men played an excellent season, helping to catapult their respective teams to the District 20 tournament held in Springfield.

It would be the first and only time Union and Gallatin would ever play against each other.

"That was a tough year — we were so prideful of our school, and knowing it was closing forever when we left was hard," said Ligon who was one of 46 in the last graduating class of 1970 at Union.

"We had our own all-black sports teams, band and cheerleaders. Why would we want to give that up to go to Gallatin?"

"Sure, we were resentful. Twice we had been second place in the district, and this was our last chance to win it."

Sue Herron, former Gallatin High School biology teacher and wife of the late Principal Dan P. Herron, said that the week leading up to game was stressful for both blacks and whites in Gallatin.

Herron said her husband and former Union High School Principal John Malone, now deceased, met a few times in the week leading up to game to prepare and discuss a plan to deal with crowd control in case violence erupted.

"Dan and Mr. Malone were very concerned. There was a lot of anxiety and hostility between whites and blacks at that time over integration," she said.

"Everyone knew it was coming. It was Union's last year and (Union students) didn't want their school to close. That last game was do or die for them.

"Everyone was told to keep their children close to them. This whole town was on edge."

On game day the gymnasium at Springfield High School was packed. Off-duty police officers and male members of the faculty from both schools stood on the sidelines ready for the worst.

But the worst never happened.

“The game started with the score staying close for the first half. Union pulled one of their biggest guys, Roy Jackson, from under the goal to try and shut me down because I was a strong outside shooter,” said Sherlin.

At halftime, the game was tied at 29-29.

“Roy Jackson was their best rebounder, so that gave my team an advantage under the goal,” said Sherlin.

In the end, Gallatin defeated Union 74-60.

The hug

“It broke our hearts... we wanted to win so bad. We had played our guts out and we were exhausted,” said Ligon.

Union Red Devil fans were devastated while Green Wave fans erupted in cheers.

“The crowd went crazy, it took several minutes for the police to get things calmed down again,” said Sherlin.

When the crowd calmed down, the game announcer called the names of the all-tournament team to the center court. Sherlin was called first, then Ligon.

“I really didn’t want to go back out on that floor. We had been beat, and it was all I could do to keep my composure,” said Ligon.

“I saw Bill coming across the floor and I saw the hurt on his face. He wanted to win as bad as I did,” said Sherlin.

“Nobody knew that we were friends ... we had both given everything we could give for this game. It was the first and last time we’d ever get to play each other in high school. It was very emotional and I just embraced him at center court,” said Sherlin.

“We were balling our eyes out,” Ligon.

When the stunned spectators saw Ligon and Sherlin embrace, a wave of silence swept over the gymnasium.

“It was an unbelievable sight... and dead silence. Then all of a sudden the crowd erupted in cheer. People cried. It was like an old-fashioned revival. It was beautiful,” said Herron.

“The tension we had been feeling all week left when they hugged each other. That gesture was so important, because it made the transition a lot easier when the two schools came together.

“Now, I don’t mean it was all easy going after that, but had that not happened in that gym on that day with those players, things definitely would have been worse the next year.”

In the fall of 1970, Union and Gallatin students integrated. Two years later, Gallatin’s basketball team won its first state championship with Ligon’s brother Tyree on the team.

“Through the years people have often told me that that embrace between me and Bill was a defining moment for Gallatin,” said Sherlin. “It’s when the town became one community.”

Ligon agrees. “People in Gallatin became more accepting, and I believe that event humanized (African Americans) in the eyes of whites. The very next week my picture was in the Nashville Tennessean.”

“Losing the game hurt, but looking back now, it couldn’t have been any other way. If Union had won, I know it would have been a much different story,” said Ligon.

Going their separate ways

The next year, Ligon went to Vanderbilt on a full basketball scholarship and became the second African American to ever play basketball in the SEC.

He went on to play professionally for the Detroit Pistons from 1974-76 and returned to Vanderbilt to study law.

Ligon is now an attorney living in Gallatin.

Sherlin was signed to play basketball for the University of Tennessee, but instead went on to play professional baseball for the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Sherlin plays professional golf and lives in White House.

Cast call

ACT 2 President Nancy Bailey said her company will be shooting interviews for the documentary at the Palace Feb. 23-25.

Scenes recreating the events from Sherlin and Ligon's childhood will be recreated in the gym at the Board of Education.

"Our plan is to have the feature film shot on location in Gallatin. It's important that we have the community behind us on this project," said Bailey. "This is a story about relationships, not basketball.

"The game was only the vehicle for change."

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