

# The **WHITE HOUSE** Watch

A Community Newspaper for **White House, TN** & Its Neighbors

- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Lifestyle](#)
- [Editorials](#)
- [Obits](#)
- [Contact](#)

## Search

search this site...

- White House, TN
  - **Nashville TN**



- 
- Temperature: 70°F
- Wind: SSW at 12 mph gusting to 20 mph
- Updated: 9:53 am GMT-6

## • Admin

- [Register](#)
- [Login](#)
- [Wordpress](#)
- [XHTML](#)

Feb

28

## [Lesson in racism opens eyes to local history](#)

Filed Under [Editorial](#), [Gary Burton](#) |



On page 22 in the sports section of this week's issue of The White House Watch, you will find a story about a film being produced to document the effect of racial integration on Sumner County in 1970.

It is the story of White House resident Eddie Sherlin, a white basketball player about to graduate from Gallatin High School in 1970 and Bill Ligon, a black player from Union High School.

I spent several hours researching the story last weekend, but what I came away with could never be related correctly in a news or sports story.

Ligon, who later played basketball for Vanderbilt University and professionally with the Detroit Pistons, was very open to me about his early life in Gallatin and what helped to shape him into the local attorney seen today by most people.

I began my journalism career in east Arkansas, and most towns along the Mississippi Delta have a dark and bloody past when it comes to race relations during the last 60 years. I had done several stories over the years involving the struggles of the South to comply with government-ordered integration in the 1960s. I had heard so many of these tales of a different time, that I almost became numb to the horrors – I just didn't have anything in my life to compare the experiences.

Ligon said that while his personal experiences growing up in Sumner County were not excessively bad, his family was not blind to the troubles going on around them in the United States.

He spoke of leaving the area for vacations as a child to the North to visit family in Detroit and other places to find the social restrictions placed on blacks to be more lenient and nothing like back home.

"It's all about numbers," he told me. "In Gallatin, there just weren't many blacks to begin with. You had to have numbers large enough to worry the whites at the time before things got bad."

Other things Ligon told me are still shocking to consider.

He said that as much as he hopes things change, he feels that racial discrimination will never completely go away.

"Let's say you wanted to discriminate against Germans or Italians," he said. "You wouldn't know a German was walking down the street unless you talk to them directly, and even then the accent may not jump out at you. However, a black man walking down the same street will always be a black man walking down the street. We are visually different and you can't stop that."

It's wonderful that Ligon and Sherlin stepped across racial boundaries in the 1960s and became friends with a common interest – basketball. On the grassy court at the home of Ligon's aunt, they were athletic equals. At the end of a game, there was a clear-cut winner and loser, but both were decided by skill, not skin color.

I want to take time in this column to thank Eddie Sherlin and Bill Ligon for sharing their lives with me for the story, and also thank them for opening their hearts.

My 7-year-old daughter tagged along when I interviewed these men, and we had a long talk about their experiences on the way home.

"Daddy, you mean black kids couldn't do all the things white kids could back then?"

I reminded her of the details Ligon mentioned of his own childhood.

"He is a nice man and smiles when he laughs," she said. "How can people be mean to someone like that just because of their color?"

I had no answer for her. I just hope she keeps that attitude for a long time.

*(Gary Burton is managing editor for The White House Watch newspaper. He can be reached by phone at 870-8549 or via e-mail at [editor@checkyourwatch.com](mailto:editor@checkyourwatch.com).)*

## Comments

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Name (required)

---

Email (required)

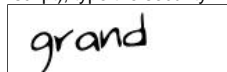
---

Website

---

Anti-spam word: (Required)\*

To prove you're a person (not a spam script), type the security word shown in the picture.



Speak your mind

---

Submit Comment

Copyright © 2007 [White House Watch](#) • Powered by [WordPress](#) • Using [Blue Zinfandel Squared 2.0](#) theme created by [Brian Gardner](#)