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Movie in works about area friends

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GALLATIN – The first time the Union High School Red Devils met up to play basketball with the Green Wave of Gallatin High School in February of 1970, there would be no re-match between the teams.

Union High School, the “black high school,” was being merged with Gallatin and the Red Devils would be no more, as integration became a part of Sumner County.

For two opposing players that night, the evening was a culmination of basketball dueling that began more than a decade earlier – not only on opposite sides of the court, but from opposite sides of society as well.

Union’s Bill Ligon and Gallatin’s Eddie Sherlin had been playing ball together for more than 10 years – ever since Sherlin stumbled upon a basketball game outside the home of Ligon’s aunt just a few blocks from his home.

“We were just kids back then” Sherlin said. “We played together because we liked sports and color didn’t matter.”

Now, in 2007, a movie production crew has been interviewing Sherlin and Ligon for an upcoming docudrama based on the lives of the two men and how they met for one last game together in 1970.

ACT 2, a Nashville-based media production company, wants to tell the story of the two men and how a friendship blossomed in spite of those around them.

Ligon, now a Sumner County attorney, was showing the film crew where blacks had to enter the Palace movie theater at the rear of the building.

“It was pretty scary,” Ligon said. “There was just a small light bulb at the top of the rickety stairs. We sat up top and the whites sat underneath. We had to go back outside and to the front to buy popcorn, and then back again.”

Both young men went from playing outdoor basketball to school athletics and the frequency of the afternoon games grew farther and farther apart.

Although only one or two streets separated the homes of Sherlin and Ligon, they would not face each other on the hardwood court until the night of Feb. 28, 1970.

In the end, Union lost to Gallatin, 74-60, but Ligon and Sherlin met each other on the court for a hug and their goodbyes.

After graduation, Ligon turned down a scholarship to Princeton to attend Vanderbilt University in Nashville and played with the Commodores during his time there. Later, he played NBA ball for the Detroit Pistons before settling back home in Gallatin to work as an attorney.

Sherlin went on to play professional baseball for the Pittsburgh Pirates, even though he had never played the game in high school.

"They just didn't have a baseball team at Gallatin High School," he said laughing. He later coached at Vol State for the Lady Pioneers.

Sherlin now lives in White House with his wife, Darlene, and son, Jacob.

Both men said they think their story is one that should be told and are proud to be the subject of the upcoming movie.

"It's going to take a powerful movie to help people understand what we both went through," Ligon added. "It was an important time for us, but almost 40 years later, it is so different looking back on it now."

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

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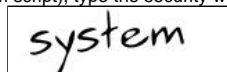
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