

Unsung Heroes:



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It is nearly impossible to imagine the halls of Centennial any other way than they are today — students chatting together, laughing together, walking side-by-side together — regardless of race. But the reality is that we don't need to look that far back in history to see an entirely different scene in Howard County schools. Whites. Blacks. Segregation.

February is Black History Month. It is a month in which the haunting, yet triumphant history of African Americans is remembered. Among the many things that occur during Black History Month (also known as African American History Month), is the effort to educate by recounting the heroes of the Civil Rights movement in America — celebrating the indomitable spirit of the people who fought for justice and equality. Among the most celebrated are Martin Luther King Jr., Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks. But there are countless names of unsung heroes who all made sacrifices and took risks, in turn, altering the base of our nation from one of racism and segregation to one closer to equality and unity.

Silas E. Craft. Leola Dorsy. Reverend Douglas Sands.

These are just a few of our local Howard County heroes, who lived with dignity during a time of segregation, and fought with dignity to establish the desegregation of Howard County public schools.

It took just nine months for the School Board of Commissioners (Board of Education) to fulfill a state order to find and purchase a site for the first “colored” school in Howard County. But it took the Board nearly 10 years to heed the Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. The Ellicott City Colored School was a one-room schoolhouse that served black students in grades 1-7. Situated at 8683 Frederick Road, it was established in 1880, and closed just one year prior to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Ed* decision, amid long-standing reports of horrible and unsafe conditions: contaminated water, no electricity, overcrowding and inaccessibility.

“Most of the schools in the 11 [Confederate] states have been destroyed or demolished. We are ashamed to be reminded of that time when whites thought we all looked alike and learned alike and weren't equal. But it is also our history and tells us where we have come from and the struggles we

have overcome,” Ellicott City tour guide, Bobby Cobbs, told the *Washington Post* in October of 2014.

In 1949, the county's first “colored” high school opened. Though the Board voted it to be called the “Atholton Colored High School,” the black community fought for it to be the Harriet Tubman High School. While the Board agreed to change the name, it never actually placed the name on the building for as long it remained open (16 years). It closed in 1965, the year that Howard County finally and fully desegregated its schools.

At the time of *Brown v. Board of Ed*, the Howard County Board of Education was composed of only three members, who reacted to the Supreme Court's decision by implementing an initial long-term desegregation plan. The plan called for the first five grades being desegregated by September 1956, and then a single year desegregated every year afterwards, with complete desegregation of the school system in 1963.

During this transitional period, black students could “voluntarily” choose to integrate by appearing in front of the Board with their parents, and applying to attend the closest school to their home. Yet segregated schools remained open, and

transportation remained segregated. Additionally, voluntary integration was subject to approval, and not guaranteed. According to official Board of Education documents, the official policy was: “During this period of transition, the Board reserves the right to postpone or deny the admission of a pupil to any school due to lack of facilities or for any other justifiable reason.”

Reverend Douglas Sands, 80, a former member of the NAACP and one of the leaders of the local civil rights movement at the time, told *The Wingspan* that the announcement of desegregation in Howard County had taken so long “because they were prejudiced.”

In 1964, he conducted a study of 14 counties in the state of Maryland. “I found that the local and state boards of education had made no effort in desegregating schools,” Sands said. “No one was interested.”

Sands's sister, Suzi, was one of the first black students to attend a white school in 1958. It wasn't easy, he said. According to Sands, the principal of the white school told his mother that once Suzi started getting C's, she'd be sent back to the “colored” school. While his mother refused the idea, she was told she didn't have a choice in the matter.

These types of roadblocks

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The Hidden Champions of the Civil Rights Movement

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to integration, along with the Board's eventual delay of the date for complete desegregation to 1967, caused frustrations to mount among the black community and segregation critics.

A monumental Board meeting occurred in April 1964. Silas Craft, president of Howard County's NAACP and principal of Harriet Tubman High School, had called a meeting with the Board. Robert Kittleman (father of current Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman), the first white member and education chair of the NAACP at the time, read a prepared statement "to discuss one of Howard County's major problems - the continuing delay in public school integration... Time has run out."

Robert Kittleman read: "It has now been nearly ten years since the Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional. The administrative practice of the School Board and Superintendent of perpetuating school districts on a racial rather than a geographic basis is in defiance of the Supreme Court decision of 1954. In the last ten years, this county has had reasonable and ample opportunity to comply with this decision. We have come to you today to give you an opportunity to eliminate

this practice before demonstrations are started and legal suits are instituted."

While the Board responded to Kittleman with a laundry list of reasons why the desegregation policy was "right and just for all concerned," Kittleman and the NAACP representatives refused to give in, and on Feb. 9, 1965, the Board voted to completely desegregate the schools two years ahead of schedule. The 1965 school year began with black and white students in integrated classrooms.

Only 50 years have passed since that small victory.

Allan Kittleman recently reflected on the actions and motivations of his father in a statement to *The Wingspan*.

"My Dad did what he did not because he thought we'd remember and praise him 50 years later, but because he knew it was right. He helped others see that segregation was wrong and was hurtful to our county and his friends of every color."

In 2012, the school board voted unanimously (9-0) to approve a proclamation that apologized with "profound regret" regarding the system's treatment of black students during segregation.

It wasn't the first time that Howard County looked back, with shame and regret, for its treatment of the black community. In a 2004

publication commemorating *Brown v. Board of Ed*, it admitted that in 1887, white teachers were paid eight times more than African American teachers, a petition by African American families to allow school education to go beyond the seventh grade was unanimously denied, and old toilets from white schools were moved to African-American schools to save money.

Looking back on this history should not provoke anger or resentment; instead, it should first serve as an inspiration to all. Second, it should remind us all that our community, our world, is strongest when we walk together in peace and trust.

Sherman Howell, vice president of research and agenda planning for the African American Coalition of Howard County, told *The Wingspan* that he believes that segregation still exists, but that change can happen.

"The segregation that takes place in Howard County is the kind that, in a sense, separates poor kids from more wealthy kids," Howell said. He sees predominantly African American families who struggle to find and make a living in places other than predominantly Black communities.

"It gets back to civil rights... You have to continue your fight for justice, and you have to do it through

nonviolent means. If you do that, sure, things can change," Howell said.

Recent events in Ferguson and New York have reignited the fears, angers, and insecurities of the past. But perhaps the best medicine is to celebrate Black History Month, to take time out and reflect upon the battles and victories of the Civil Rights Movement. In doing so, we will not only be reminded of all the voices that broke down the senseless barriers, but perhaps the resonating voices of these past heroes will help calm the discord and rebuild the united communities so that their battles weren't fought in vain.

Go online to www.chswing-span.wordpress.com to read the exclusive statement from Allan Kittleman about his father's work, as well as more content celebrating local Civil Rights heroes throughout February.

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