

REVIEW & COMMENT

An Olympic dream

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From friendship grew memorial to Owens

By John Wright Jr.

There has arisen an Olympic dream, no longer deferred, in the middle of a cotton field in Oakville, flanked in the distance by the imposing mountain ranges of North Alabama.

John Wright Jr., retired from the University of Alabama at Birmingham where he was involved in public relations and fund-raising, is a free-lance writer and actor. He wrote this for The News.

An inspiring place for this dream to take wings, like the graceful prince of speed it commemorates, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park may be out in the middle of nowhere. But soon this tribute to the great Olympic champion, born near the park site into Alabama sharecropper poverty, will become known, now, finally, everywhere.

In another time in Alabama the mention of the color of a person's skin will no longer be seen as some required check-point to determine where one is likely to fit into the scheme of

things.

But to the full telling of this story, it seems justified, even necessary.

For the past five years, James Pinion, a white man, and Therman White, a black man born in Lawrence County, worked together to help the Jesse Owens Memorial Park come to be.

When the Lawrence County Commission voted in 1983 not to place a memorial plaque in the courtyard to give witness to Oakville native Jesse Owens for capturing four gold medals in

front of Adolf Hitler during the 1936 Olympics, they unknowingly lit sparks of anger and determination that 13 years later helped bring the Olympic torch and the Jesse Owens Memorial Park to Oakville.

On a day in 1991, White and Marvin Fitzgerald, a cousin of Jesse Owens, paid a visit to the Lawrence County office of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System in Moulton. There, for the first time, White met Pinion, who is county agent coordinator there.

A friendship of trust and per-

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severance began to grow from that first meeting. White and Fitzgerald asked Pinion to help them pursue a dream held by the citizens of Oakville — the building of a park to honor their beloved native son and Olympic champion.

They told Pinion they didn't have any money but they did have a large piece of land in Oakville near where Owens lived in a three-room sharecropper home until the family moved to Cleveland in 1919.

Pinion took their dream seriously and became a dreamer with them. He contacted Dr. Tom Chesnut of Auburn University, a tourism specialist Pinion had met at a seminar. Chesnut took an immediate interest in the park idea. He guided Pinion and White through a process that resulted in citizen ideas for the park, site design and cost estimates.

From 1991 to 1994, fund-raising to finance the park dragged along with little response from potential donors. Cost estimates were close to \$1.5 million. The dream seemed beyond the grasp of the dreamers. The two men were discouraged. But an inspiration growing out of their desperation saved the dream.

"They knew the Olympic torch was to be carried across the country on its way to Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics. Why not see if the torch could be routed through Oakville, they thought.

"The idea was presented to Dr. Leroy Walker, president of the U.S. Olympic Committee, at a meeting in 1994 at The Club in Birmingham during a gathering of influential political, business and community leaders.

Walker liked the suggestion.

When the Olympic Committee and

other torch run supporters gave the idea the green light, money to build the park began to fall in place. But the pressure was on. The park had to be finished in time for the torch to arrive there June 29.

With the cooperation of federal, state and local elected officials, corporate sponsors and local and out-of-town donors, nearly \$1.5 million was raised. Major funding came from TVA, HUD, the Appalachian Commission and some state funds.

When Pinion and White carried the torch, together, during the dedication of the park on June 29, a joyful crowd of more than 10,000 men, women and children — black and white — applauded, yelled and laughed, many with tears streaming down their cheeks.

Yes, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park was dedicated in grand fashion that hot Saturday afternoon.

Present for the historic occasion were the honoree's widow, Mrs. Ruth Solomon Owens, who now lives in Chicago; 16 other family members, including the Owens' three daughters and their families, and Gov. Fob James.

James told the ecstatic crowd, "History meets here today." The former Auburn football star said that Jesse Owens "was an inspiration to me."

Stuart Owens Rankin, Jesse Owens' 29-year-old grandson, ran the torch into the park. As he approached the stage near a majestic bronze statue of his grandfather in his classic sprinter form with the familiar number "3" on his track jersey, Rankin paused to go to his grandmother. Holding out the torch with one hand, he embraced her with his other arm and she him as their

eyes filled with tears. This moment was the high point in a dream unfolding that seems impossible to hope for back in 1983 when the Lawrence County Commission said "no."

The crowd was hushed now as Ruth Owens rose to speak.

"Jesse is watching today, and he's very proud of his grandson," she said.

"I can't tell you how special this is. I've been to five Olympic Games and I have never seen anything like this. I had no idea it would be as elaborate as it is."

Later Mrs. Owens would say, "When I asked why they were doing this for Jesse, they said 'Because we loved him.' That was enough for me. The way we were treated and received was enough to show us they meant what they were doing."

The park includes a museum (as yet unfinished), a welcome center, a basketball court and a replica of the three-room sharecropper house the 11-member Owens family survived in.

In his spiritual autobiography, Jesse, which the Olympian co-wrote with Paul Neimark, he tells of walking nine miles to church in Oakville and how the family would share their dreams for a better future as they walked home from worshipping God.

Pinion and White and their supporters now face an unexpected task in completing the park. The funds raised to date are nearly gone. The track included in the master plan is not yet built. But you can bet these two men, and all who carry this dream in their hearts, will see the project through to its promised conclusion.

When White introduced Pinion at area black churches as they traveled together to share the dream with the

community, he would say, "Mr. Pinion may be white but he's a brother."

Pinion recently said about his friend, "I've come to respect Therman as much as any person I know."

Therman White and James Pinion prove what can be accomplished when we pursue our dreams together, using our God-given gifts of creativity, trust and perseverance, not letting differences block the path to cooperation and understanding.

Thanks to their hard work and the hundreds of people who helped to make the Jesse Owens Memorial Park a reality, the spirit of this revered Olympic champion has come home to rest — in the middle of an Oakville cotton field where his life began.