

# 'Celebration of a champ'

## Owens museum opens to public; dream fulfilled

By Ronnie Thomas  
DAILY Staff Writer

OAKVILLE — Words and deeds from the heart flooded Jesse Owens Memorial Park during the dedication of the track star's museum on a sweltering Saturday afternoon.

From the slicing of the ribbon by his wife, Ruth, to the planting of a white oak tree by the family, the fact that this was a historical event laced in human emotion and focused on healing race relations was not lost on the crowd.

The Rev. Kenneth Owens of Saint Mark Primitive Baptist Church of Athens said people today must overcome some of the same barriers Jesse Owens hurdled on his way to greatness.

"When Governor George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door, it did not stop progress," he said. "When the Lawrence County Commission kept a monument in Jesse Owens' memory from being placed on the courthouse square, it did not stop progress. We must keep his vision alive. What are you doing to make an impact in someone else's life?"

Gloria Hemphill, Owens' oldest daughter, speaking on behalf of the family, said, "We hope you will accept us as a citizen of this beautiful county, and that we may be one of you."

She called the museum a "celebration of a champion and a master of the spirit as well as the mechanics of the sport. His faith in America has inspired countless others to do their best for their family and their country."

James Pinion, Lawrence County Extension coordinator, said development of the park was a dream that surfaced nine years ago, centered on a barren field of 17.5 acres, which grew to 30.

He said the dreamers wanted to honor and perpetuate the memory of Owens' athletic and humanitarian exploits, and that as dreams are achieved, others take their place. One is to complete the park by adding an Olympic size track.

Pinion said Lawrence counties are proud Owens was born here and proud, through the park effort, that they have had the privilege to know his family.

In closing, he paraphrased the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.:

"We are proud that we can finally say, home at last, home at last, thank God Almighty, Jesse Owens is home at last!"

The white oak planted near Owens' bronze sculpture is symbolic of English oak seedlings he received for each of the four gold medals he won at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He planted three of the trees, two in Cleveland and one at Ohio State University, but the fourth seedling died.

The plaque at the site reads:

"Jesse Owens Gold Medal Oak, planted by the Jesse Owens family, May 16, 1998. May the tree grow to the honor of Jesse Owens' victories and achievements."

Visitors pouring into the air-conditioned museum found a respite from the stifling heat and more information and artifacts concerning Jesse Owens than ever assembled under one roof.

Terry Frederick, 53, of Atlanta, who works for CSX Railroad, is visiting brothers in the Waco community of Franklin County where he was born, but timed his trip to coincide with the museum's opening.

"I read a book on Owens about four years ago, and it was the most I knew about him until today," he said. "From what I'm seeing and hearing, he was an even greater human being than he was an athlete. It is appropriate he is being honored in this way."

Pete Hatcher, 36, a sales representative from Birmingham, called the exhibits "breath-taking" and the museum opening "truly historical."

He said it isn't everyday that an event of this magnitude occurs.

"This facility is a monument that will stand the test of time, and generation after generation will learn from it. My son is only 2, but I'll be bringing him in the future."



Ruth Owens, supported by Lawrence County's Therman White, watches with her son-in-law, Malcolm Hemphill, while a white oak tree is planted during dedication ceremonies of the Owens museum. DAILY Photo by David Higginbotham

## Owens grandson had commitment

OAKVILLE — Many were saddened that Stuart Owen Rankin couldn't attend Saturday's dedication of the Jesse Owens Museum because of a prior commitment.

Rankin, a grandson of Owens, ran the 1996 Atlanta Olympics torch into the park when it was dedicated and the Owens sculpture unveiled.

"The conflict," his father Stuart said, "is that he's proposing today while driving his girlfriend, Sarah Trenary, from New York to Chicago."

Ms. Trenary, a law student at New York University, plans to join a Chicago law firm.

— Ronnie Thomas



Ruth Owens and sculptor Branko Medenica of Birmingham share a moment before the Jesse Owens Olympic statue in Owens Park. DAILY Photo by David Higginbotham