

# Owens Museum opens to public

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They lined the walkways of the Jesse Owens Museum like a group of children waiting to see a famous cartoon character.

When the white van carrying the Owens family approached, those who were on hand for the museum's dedication edged a little closer.

"I want to see Mrs. Owens," a little boy told his mother.

Mrs. Ruth Owens just barely had her feet on the fertile soil of Oakville before she was surrounded by autograph seekers and people wanting to have their picture made with her.

About 500 people came Saturday as Mrs. Owens cut the ribbon to mark the official opening on the museum.

The smoldering heat didn't push visitors away as the family gathered on the south side of the museum to plant a white oak tree.

Owens' oldest daughter, Mrs. Gloria Hemphill, spoke for the family during the ceremony.

"We were not born in Oakville, but we hope you will accept us as a citizen of this beautiful county," she said.

Mrs. Hemphill said her father's faith in America "has inspired countless others to do their best for their family and their country."

Owens' 89-year-old brother, Sylvester Owens, called the day "a celebration of a man who was real simple just like most Americans."

Sylvester said his brother would deflect the attention from himself if he was living. Owens died of lung cancer on March 31, 1980.

"We picked cotton over there," Sylvester said as he pointed to the corn field behind the park. "We were a dirt-poor family and didn't have anything. But I never had an argument with Jesse. He'd always put everyone else first and himself second."

Sylvester said he was sure that Jesse was looking down at the park and smiling.

"He's smiling because we're here together as one group," he said. "Black and white people are at his birthplace celebrating one cause. He's smiling because his struggle and name brought us together."

The Rev. Kenneth Owens said people today must overcome some of the same barriers Jesse Owens faced on his road to greatness. He encouraged people to keep Owens' vision alive.

"What are you doing to make an impact in someone else's life?" Rev. Owens asked.

Plans to plant a white oak tree during the dedication came from a statement Jesse Owens made in the documentary "Return to Berlin."

In the film, Owens talked about the four English oak seedlings he received after winning four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics.

Owens planted two of the trees in Cleveland, one at Ohio State University, but the fourth seedling died. The tree-planting concluded the dedication ceremony.

A plaque at the base of the tree 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."



Beverly Prather, the middle of three daughters, wipes tears from her eyes while touring the Jesse Owens Memorial Museum. (Staff photo by Deangelo McDaniel)

## Family gets emotional tour of Owens Museum

By Deangelo McDaniel  
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The widow and children of James Cleveland Owens approached the Jesse Owens Memorial Museum with great anticipation.

"It's beautiful, beautiful," Mrs. Ruth Owens said as she stepped out of the Oakville sun and into the foyer of the museum that honors her husband.

She gently touched one of portraits of Owens in full stride during the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin, Germany.

Over the next hour, Mrs. Owens and her three daughters -- Mrs. Gloria Hemphill, 65, Mrs. Beverly Prather, 60, and Mrs. Marlene Rankin, 59 -- would ride a roller-coaster of emotions as they slowly strolled through the 3,600-square foot museum.

The descendants of Jesse Owens laughed and cried as they walked by the larger-than-life pictures that honored a larger-than-life man.

Mrs. Owens was not aware that there was a section that honored her marriage to Owens. As a mass of reporters and camera people surrounded her, Mrs. Owens cried. She reached to touch the display.

"Oh Jesse," she said with tears on her face. "That's my Jesse. We were so young. He would love this. This is great."

Mrs. Owens spent most of her time watching the video clips. With her children at her side, Mrs. Owens spent about 20 minutes watching the tape prepared by NBC before the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

It was an emotional time for the entire family. Mrs. Prather, Owens' second daughter, couldn't hold in her emotions.

"My daddy was special," Mrs. Prather said as she removed her glasses to wipe the tears away. "He was so special. I'm glad this museum doesn't define him as just the man who won four gold medals. He was much more than that. A lot more than that."

The museum is designed to walk visitors through the life of Owens. It starts with his birth in Oakville and concludes with his death of lung cancer on March 31, 1980.

"I'm sure Jesse would like this, but you would never know it," said Sylvester Owens, the Olympic great's 89-year-old brother.

"Jesse was a modest person," his brother added. "He'd rather put the attention on someone else than on himself. He'd give to others and go without. That's how my brother was, just a simple man who wanted others and his family to have the best."

Mrs. Hemphill, who helped representatives with the Jesse Owens Park Board gather information for the museum, said she and her family were pleased.

"It's absolutely wonderful," Mrs. Hemphill said. "The museum is so unique, so different, so wonderful. It represents what daddy always felt, pride in this country."

Mrs. Rankin, who serves as chairman of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago, was also pleased with the museum.

"My father was so modest, I'm sure he wouldn't think he was worthy of any honor like this," Mrs. Rankin said.

Mrs. Rankin was able to control her emotions until she looked at the photo of her and her father made during the 1960 homecoming football game at Ohio State.

She was the first black homecoming queen at Ohio State. The picture is of Mrs. Rankin wearing her crown. Her father is standing next to her.

"Dad had been invited to speak at the half," Mrs. Rankin said with tears on her cheeks. "I'll never forget one particular sentence. He turned to me and said 'And remember, darling, it could only happen in America.'"

Mrs. Hemphill, whose daughter, Gina, carried the torch into the Los Angeles Coliseum during the 1984 Olympics, said her father was a man who respected everyone and encouraged his children to do the same thing.

"Despite his success, my father felt like everyone was due respect and admiration," she said. "He believed that anyone who has a spirit eventually wins out. I'm accused of being a dreamer, but there's more good in all of us than we might realize. There's a reason for this museum, this park. It didn't just happen."