

Opinion

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Better race relations comes in tiny steps

There was a time when the hero of the 1936 Berlin Olympics wasn't welcomed in Lawrence County, where he was born, because he was black.

As late as the 1980s, a proposal to put a monument to the world-famous track star on the courthouse lawn created enough controversy to scuttle the project.

Jesse Owens died in 1980, before he could see black and white citizens work together to create the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum in Oakville. His family lived there during his childhood before moving to Ohio.

But his wife, Ruth Owens, did. She helped dedicate the park in 1996, when the gold medalist's grandson brought the lighted Olympic Torch into the park to the cheers of thousands that included Gov. Fob James.

She died June 27 in Chicago at age 86. She lived to see a shift in the family's attitude about Southern hospitality. "It was a different Alabama for us than what we had always heard," her son-in-law Malcolm Hemphill said. "We had a wonderful time."

Mrs. Owens spent much of her time protecting and polishing the legacy of her late husband. She gets credit for making the Oakville museum meaningful by endorsing the pro-

ject and opening doors to get memorabilia of the four-time Olympic winner.

The park still generates its share of controversy, much of which is race based. But that is part of the Owens legacy. He is a symbol of racial equality overcoming hatred.

Mrs. Owens came to the park once more, when the museum opened in 1998. Hopefully, her children and grandchildren will continue to visit, and the park will overcome its financial problems and become a major tourist attraction and shrine to an individual's patriotism.

Former President Clinton came back to Washington recently after extended time abroad to talk about how nations must work together.

He could have been talking about Lawrence County when he urged "the simple recognition that we all do better when we help each other." He said we must "create a world where nobody's on top because of the group they're in."

"This is just gonna make life more interesting," he said.

The park is not only a monument to the runner, it's proof that some Southerners, white and black, are working together for the common good.