



Preston Washington – Class of 1962

Preston donated two plaques featuring him and articles on the Interscholastic League from the Kansas City Star, January 24, 1993

The Early Years

We lived at 2208 Olive when I was in grade school. My parents built our new home at 5520 Agnes. We moved in late October/early November 1957 after I started at Southeast. The boundary between Paseo and Southeast was 55th Street. Since our new home was south of 55th, we were in the Southeast district.

I attended Booker T Washington elementary school at 24th and Prospect. It was so overcrowded that we only went ½ days until about 3rd grade. They even had classes in a hall at 22nd and Prospect. When Phyllis Wheatley opened, it relieved some of the overcrowding at Booker T Washington.

There were 7 of us who went to Southeast from outside the Southeast district – not from the feeder schools. I didn't realize that until years later at a reunion when they were taking pictures of us by grade school.

My brothers Russell and Curtis went to Pershing. The principal at Pershing tried to convince my parents to have them attend another school, in an area and with students where they would be "more comfortable." Of course, my parents would have none of that.

I had four brothers who attended Southeast:

Russell – Class of 1964

Curtis – Class of 1969

Wayne – Class of 1977

David – Class of 1984 or 1985

I did not receive my diploma for elementary school until I finished eighth grade at Southeast.

High School Memories

Despite all the attention I received being the first black to attend Southeast, my time there was not defined by race. It was about community – its loss and change. The Southeast community was always welcoming. I have said that against the backdrop of Little Rock, my welcome confirmed the motto of the Knights and Ladies of the Round Table: “A Brave Southeast Knight loveth chivalry, truth, honor, freedom and fair courtesy.” My time at Southeast was defined by the loss of my childhood community.

I remember arriving at Southeast on the first day. It was a pleasant day. There must have been 1,000 kids waiting between the flag pole and the front door of the school. The doors to the school were not open yet. My mother dropped me off at flag pole, and I remember trying to decide where to stop. At the flag pole, halfway to the front door, or should I walk all the way to the front steps? I decided to stop at the half way point. We were all waiting until the doors opened and we could go into the building. No one said anything to me, but there were no problems.

One of the counselors tried to convince me to transfer to Manual. She was not even my counselor. She said I would probably enjoy working with my hands.

I began at Southeast as an eighth grader. Mrs. Lowrey was my Common Learnings teacher. Her classroom was on the second floor west of the clock. We stayed in Common Learnings several hours each day. We did not change classes every hour until our freshman year. I think my other classes that first year were wood and gym.

I had Mrs. Berkowitz for home room. I remember one time she had me pronounce words and then had a white student say the same words. Mrs. Berkowitz pointed out the difference in pronunciation. This was not a put down. Mrs. Berkowitz was an English teacher and she was Jewish. I believe she had good intentions and was using this exercise as her attempt at diversity. I later learned to “talk white.”

In eighth grade we played other classes in football and basketball. My class won those games.

Mr. Langford was the first teacher I really bonded with. We developed a rapport, and he had me help out around his house. I especially remember helping clean up after the Ruskin tornado. One day his wife fixed us lunch. I was very conscious of my manners – correctly using the knife and fork. To my surprise, Mr. Langford and his wife ate in a very casual manner, using their hands to pick up the food. I think they were trying to put me at ease. Mr. Langford was a friend of Judge Clymer. He was the first black municipal judge, and he spoke in Mr. Langford's Family Living classes.

I made my first friends at Southeast in gym class. Some classmates I remember are Bob Black, Bill Poleson (his father taught at Central), and John Reed. Larry Norris was a good friend. I visited at his home. Larry was the first one I bonded with. Michael and Buddy Herndon were also black. Mr. Powell brought them downstairs to introduce them to me one day when we were running in the downstairs hall. Oliver Story was the first black to graduate from Southeast. He started at Southeast as a junior the second semester of my freshman year. He graduated in 1960.

There was a new home addition east of Cleveland at 51st Street. It was called Sheraton Estates. A number of black families moved in there, and some of the kids came to Southeast during my freshman year. Academically, I was probably smarter than I showed in class. Kids, especially boys, did not want to appear too smart or be the teacher's pet.

My junior year in 1961, we went to the state basketball tournament. My brother Russell was a freshman and was also on the team. We played Crystal City. Their star player was Bill Bradley. All we heard was how great Bill Bradley was. We were asked what we wanted for lunch, and one of our Southeast players, Bill Cleary, said he wanted Bill Bradley on a stick. We lost to Crystal City. Bill Bradley went on to Princeton and then to the New York Nicks. He later was the U.S Senator from New Jersey.

It still bothers me that we lost the state regional playoff game my senior year to Rockhurst. We had an African American referee; it was the first time we saw one. He was a teacher or coach at Manual. He called a foul on Russell, and Rockhurst went on to win. I think he was trying to show that he was not partial to a black player. We should have won.

I played football and basketball and ran some track. I remember running after school through Swope Park to the zoo. We ran around the old zoo building and then back to the school.

I was not very social at Southeast. I never went to a prom at Southeast. I did go to the proms at Central and Lincoln with girls I knew from grade school or from other high schools. I did not attend any parties at friends' homes until my senior year. Even then, I took girls from other schools – Paseo and Lincoln.

I remember the Senior Assembly when I was a junior. They said Bill Ward willed his loneliness to Preston Washington. I remember everyone turning around looking for me to see what I thought.

Events

I started at Southeast three years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education that separate schools for black students were unconstitutional. The same week I walked into Southeast in 1957, the Arkansas governor ordered the state National Guard to Little Rock's Central High School in an attempt to block the enrollment of nine black students.

I remember meeting with Mr. McMillan and Mr. Powell when my father took me to enroll. Mr. McMillan and Mr. Powell stood with their arms around each other's shoulders. They were very welcoming. Mr. McMillan said, "I guarantee you'll have no problems here." The seniors were alerted that no problems would be tolerated, and for the most part, I did not have any problems.

I remember hearing monkey sounds and Tarzan calls in the hall. I had one or two confrontations. A boy came up to me at my locker and acted like he might strike me. After a little of that, I finally caught his fist and forced it down. That was the end of that.

I was cautious and took steps to avoid trouble. I did not walk home at the same time or by the same route. I stayed late shooting hoops or watching football practice. I varied my activities. After that first year, I was busy with sports and practice. I had a friend tell me I had no idea of the racial problems. I just did not see them. For the most part, only white kids lived

south of Southeast, so they did not have problems walking home. The problems were north of the school where black and white kids walked home in the same direction.

Beyond Southeast

I remember when the Kansas City Athletics came to Kansas City from Philadelphia. We could walk to the stadium, and sometimes my father bought us tickets. Other times, we sat in the bleachers at Lincoln High School and watched the games from there.

In the summers, I worked at the pony ring in Swope Park. I got \$5 a day for 12 hour days, seven days a week. Mr. Fish owned the operation. We even worked at his farm and helped sometimes when the colts were born. In grade school, we played basketball year round in our back yards. In the winter, we put down cardboard over the ice or snow so we could play.

When I first started at Southeast, I still went back to the old neighborhood to be with my friends. Later, I remember hanging out at the park at 59th and Agnes just to get out of the house.

After my time at Southeast, I went through another cultural shock and change of community when I attended Lincoln University (an all-black school) in Jefferson City. It was an HBCU school (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) founded in 1866 by veterans of the Civil War. I received a football scholarship. I attended three semesters. I got caught up in the social scene making up for not having much of a social life in high school and did not have much left for football.

After my time at Lincoln University, I joined the National Guard. After 6 months of active duty, I attended monthly meetings and 2 weeks duty each summer. I served in the National Guard for 10 years.

From 1965 until 1980, I was a member of the Kansas City Police Department. I remember being on duty the day Martin Luther King was assassinated (April 4, 1968). I was with my white partner at 59th and Prospect. He was driving. We were stopped at the light, waiting to continue northbound. I remember my partner cried. I think he was afraid of what was going to happen. I was still in the National Guard at that time, and we were given the option of staying with our National Guard unit or the police

department. I stayed with the police department. We worked 12-hour shifts during the trouble. I remember patrolling the area and taking calls.

I became a parole officer in 1983 with the Missouri Board of Probation and Parole.

In 1991, I started my current job with First Call. It is an alcohol and drug prevention and recovery agency.

I also enjoy genealogy, both of my family and the community. I am currently the president of the Midwest Afro-American Genealogical Interest Coalition (M.A.G.I.C.).

I meet with a group of Southeast graduates from 1960-1964. Our rule is “no wives, no kids” at our meetings.