

# Gallatin students learn unity from historic 1970s basketball game

3:39 PM, Mar. 11, 2011 | 3 Comments



Pictured are panelists who attended a Unity Day event March 9 at Gallatin High School. From left, historian and moderator Velma Brinkley, Sumner County Director of Schools Benny Bills, former Union High School Basketball Coach Edd Martin, retired GHS teacher Sue Herron, former GHS student Betty Carol Purcell, former UHS student Julian Buford, GHS parent Jim Sherlin and Bill Ligon, who attended Union and Gallatin high schools. / DESSISLAVA YANKOVA/Sumner County Publications

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Students at Gallatin High School learned how their school was at the center of the decades-long struggle for school integration in the South when a 1970 basketball game between segregated teams brought whites and blacks in Gallatin closer together.

On Feb. 28, 1970, the gymnasium at Springfield High School was packed for the district's final basketball game between the all-white Gallatin High and the all-black Union High.

It was the first matchup between the teams, and off-duty police officers and male members of both schools' faculties stood on the sidelines prepared for the worst in the tension-filled gym.

But at the end of the game, it wasn't the final score that caught everyone's eye, but the hug between a white and a black friend.

On Wednesday, March 9, students celebrated Unity Day at an assembly that featured a panel of speakers who played a role in the 1970 events. The students also watched a clip from the upcoming movie "Union: The Basketball Game that Changed a Town Forever" that tells the story of the two friends, Bill Ligon and Eddie Sherlin, who embraced each other again on Wednesday as adults.

The film crew expects to start filming the



Eddie Sherlin (left) and Bill Ligon chat at the Gallatin High School auditorium on Wednesday, March 9. The two became friends at age 12 and later found themselves on opposite sides of a racially-charged basketball game in 1970, the year before Union and Gallatin high schools integrated. / DESSISLAVA YANKOVA/Gallatin News Examiner

## In focus

To learn more about the film, "Union: The Basketball Game that Changed a Town Forever," visit [unionthemovie.com](http://unionthemovie.com).

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full-length feature this summer in Gallatin, and production is expected to be complete for a major release in 2012, producer Nancy Bailey said.

"I wanted to plant some seeds in their heads to think about: What it would take to jump outside of your comfort zone and hug somebody who's different and become friends?" Bailey said. "The point of this movie is to empower the viewer to do that."

### Seeds planted

Ava Chewing, a senior at Gallatin High, said she felt empowered from the history she learned Wednesday.

"It was really interesting to see the black guy and the white guy play basketball together in the video with all the separation going on back then," said Chewing, 17. "And it was really cool to have both guys these with us. It makes me want to research my family history. It makes me want to stand up and make a change."

Before students began to ask questions of the panelists, GHS student body President Trent Rogan shared a personal story with the audience. His grandmother, Mary Joyce Nickelson, was one of the first 11 black students integrated from Union to Gallatin High School. Although the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case Brown v. the Board of Education decision required schools to integrate, full integration wasn't required in Sumner County or much of Middle Tennessee until 1970.

Page 1 2 Next

**This story includes prior reporting from staff writer Jennifer Easton.**

**Reporter Dessislava Yankova can be reached at 575-7170 or [dyankova@mtcngroup.com](mailto:dyankova@mtcngroup.com).**

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After interviewing his grandmother for a history project, Rogan learned that Nickelson, an active student at Union, was not allowed to join activities at Gallatin High School.

“She was so used to being a very involved young lady, this hurt her,” Rogan, 18, said. “Some teachers treated (the first 11) as through they didn’t expect them to succeed. My grandmother proved them wrong by answering questions...and making good grades...and I thank her for all she has gone through...because it paid the way for her grandson 40 years later to become student body president of his school.”

Rogan, who was already intrigued by his grandmother’s stories, said he’s thankful to interact with the panel members, who taught him even more history.

“I couldn’t believe that I was getting all of my questions answered,” he said. “We’re very privileged students to know that something so significant had happened in our school.”

## Students find lesson in racial struggle

GHS student Darrian Bruce said she knew some of these stories from her family members of her father, who attended Gallatin High.

“Although we live in an integrated society, we still live in our own groups,” said Bruce, 17. “Wednesday was a good reminder that we still need to try harder to be united because we don’t always live that way.”

GHS student J’Nay Workings’ grandmother also attended Union.

“It was cool to learn that at that time, (Bill Ligon) went to Vanderbilt (University) and studied law as a young black man,” said Workings, 18. “It shows that anybody can do anything if they really want it.”

GHS senior Will Yarborough moved here from Kentucky but learned the story in history class last year.

“I thoroughly enjoyed having people who have experienced history talk about it,” said Yarborough, 18. “It was really interesting to hear how a white man and a black man became friends on the basketball court and maintained their friendship in spite of segregation.”

Student Trina Sexton, whose grandfather graduated two years before the basketball game occurred, said the panel locked her attention.

“The coolest part was at the end,” said Sexton, 17. “There was so much tension before the game, and after the two guys hugged at

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the end, everybody started applauding. This is just amazing!"

Gallatin historian and event moderator Velma Brinkley made it a goal to send students home with a message they would remember.

"You have witnessed how these two heroes contributed to history," Brinkley said. "My question for you is: what can you contribute for the history of humanity?"

To learn more about the film, "Union: The Basketball Game that Changed a Town Forever," visit unionthemovie.com.

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