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'I'm already missing him': Man of meager means, Bill Bethea was larger than life

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Baseball card of former Negro League baseball pitcher Bill Bethea.

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Remembering those we lost in 2017

GREENSBORO — Michael Bethea was applying for a job in Lexington when the person interviewing him thought he recognized the last name.

"Do you know 'Speed?'" Bethea said the man asked. "I said, 'I don't know 'Speed,' but my father's name is Bill.'"

And then the man launched into details about Bill Bethea's career as a pitcher in baseball's Negro Leagues and on major league farm teams. The son had not heard the nickname, but he knew the legend of his father.

"When it would get to the plate," Bethea said of one of his father's signature throws, "it would sink and people couldn't hit it."

William Homer "Bill" Bethea, who grew up in in the Greensboro area and played in segregated baseball leagues in the Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson era, died on Saturday. He would have turned 88 later this month.

His funeral is 1 p.m. Thursday at Union Memorial United

Methodist Church with visitation an hour before the service.

In 1996, Bethea was inducted into the South Atlantic League Hall of Fame, where he still holds a number of strikeout records. Bethea also helped to integrate the Lexington Indians. His baseball glove was among the items on display at the Greensboro History Museum's Warnersville exhibit last year.

"All things equal, Billy should have made it to the big leagues," said Kenneth Free Sr., who was a teammate on the Raleigh Capitals and is a former commissioner of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference. "Billy deserved to be called up."

As family and friends gathered at Bethea's home on Monday, sharing smiles, hugs and laughter, they also recalled a humanitarian, mentor to young people and smooth tenor in the choir at the Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, where he was known as "Brother Bill."

"He was quite an amazing man," daughter Danita Bethea Elam said.

Family and friends couldn't help but recall a man with a passion for life and memories that aren't so public, including his weekend bingo games on Randleman Road.

"He was a man of meager means but he would take people into his home and provide for them," said Hunter Haith, a close friend. "If he had a little bit then they got a part of what he had."

"I'm already missing him."

Bethea grew up without running water or electricity.

He honed an early reputation on the basketball court at the Windsor Recreational Center, which was the only place at the time open to African-American children.

"If you hung around the old Windsor Center, you knew about Bill Bethea," Free recalled. "Bill was 6-foot-4 and could jump, run and handle the ball. Few could compete with him."

After spending his first two years of high school at Dudley, he transferred to Immanuel Lutheran Theological Seminary near N.C. A&T, which served as a junior college and preparatory school at the time. Later, he attended Shaw University in Raleigh and City Tech Community College in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he played basketball for the famed Rucker League in Harlem.

As the story goes, Bethea was playing in a field in the 1950s when a baseball team nearby needed another player. They put him in the outfield and when he returned balls that came his way, the other players and team manager took note. The ball's path wasn't straight, but curved.

So they decided to put him on the pitcher's mound.

The rest is legend.

"You hear the stories. We've got the pictures. I wish I could have seen him play," said daughter Teresa Bethea Farmer, who, like her three siblings, inherited her dad's athletic prowess.

Soon, Bethea had made the Greensboro Red Birds, one of the semi-pro Negro League teams that traveled across the country. After that, Bethea also played on white minor league and semi-pro teams.

"The pay was low," Free said. "You had some salaries starting at \$100 a month. If you were really good you might make \$250 or \$300. Bill was that special."

But he was a humble man, too.

"He always had tips for younger players," Free said. "He wasn't arrogant. Some ballplayers could be real cocky and arrogant, but that wasn't Bill. He was just a gentleman."

He toiled on the mound in the face of segregation and fans using racial slurs at home and away. He took what was said and turned it into fuel during the game.

"He said he let his talent speak for him," nephew Thadford Fuller remembered. "After a pitch, you didn't hear much (from the crowd) after that."

It wasn't a glamorous life. Players on all-black teams often had to sleep on the bus between games and cities because the hotels were segregated. Sometimes they slept in pre-arranged homes or in the few available black hotels.

Despite talent, it was often hard making semi-pro or white teams because there were often quotas set by city officials limiting the number of black players they could have.

Some cities deeper South prohibited black players altogether.

At different times, Bethea had been signed to the Atlanta Braves, New York Mets and Pittsburgh Pirates. But he never got called up.

"He never got the attention he deserved," Free said.

Bethea still holds a number of South Atlantic League records. His ERA of 1.35 set in 1960 still stands today.

"To have a record set in 1960 still stand in 2017 is amazing with all the advances in technology and all the advances in the training regiments of athletes that have come about since Mr. Bethea," according to Eric Krupa, South Atlantic League's president.

Haith, who nominated Bethea for the Guilford County Sports Hall of Fame and the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame, has a stack of fan letters.

Some of those letters are from people like Dr. Alvin Griffin, one of the hundreds of young people Bethea mentored. Bethea worked for Greensboro's parks and recreation department for 24 years. During much of that time, he worked directly with kids.

"I thank God for his guidance at an early age," Griffin said.

As she talked about her father on Monday, Farmer read a fan letter with a Massachusetts postmark that came earlier this month with a \$10 bill and new baseball, which the fan wanted Bethea to sign and return. Bethea didn't get a chance to follow up.

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