

In the racially-charged 1960's, "Coach" Jim "Pop" Laughter Jr. refused to see color in his schools or on his teams – except for Bearcat red.

Described by his former players and colleagues as instrumental in breaking racial barriers in Henderson County, Mr. Laughter coached the first integrated football, basketball, and track teams in county history at Hendersonville Junior High School in the 1964-65 school year. And for his entire 51-year tenure with Henderson County Public Schools, he made sure those around him treated students fairly and equally regardless of race, writes current Hendersonville High School Principal Bobby Wilkins.

A pioneer on and off the field, Coach Laughter began the Physical Education program at Bruce Drysdale Elementary in 1972, and implemented the "5M program," which allowed students to take responsibility of their own learning by participating in various activity and reading stations. His son and former student athlete, BJ Laughter, recalls that Coach Laughter made Physical Education fun and challenging at Bruce Drysdale for 18 years, and even after retiring from full-time teaching, he was committed to volunteer coaching and substitute teaching until his full retirement in 2010.

"I know he is the reason that I became an educator," writes BJ Laughter, who continued the Laughter legacy in the Bearcat Nation by coaching at Hendersonville High, and by now serving as Bruce Drysdale Elementary's principal. "He taught and coached generations of families and left an everlasting mark on them."

Coach Laughter's impact "crossed generations, cultures, and societal divides," not just because he was an excellent teacher and coach striving for racial equality, but because he embodied his beliefs and sought greatness in the students he mentored.

"Through his faith and fearless leadership he (could) take the most profoundly world-weary child, and turn them into a warrior," writes Hendersonville High's baseball coach Mark Cook, who coached with Mr. Laughter.

Hendersonville High's assistant principal and athletic director Eric Gash was one of those student athletes and recalls, "As a young man, I was overweight, lacked self confidence, and struggled with a whole host of other insecurities. Pop recognized this and began to shape my perception of myself."

"(Mr. Laughter) made a name for himself in the schools by being someone who the students could turn to in times they needed someone," writes Mr. Wilkins.

"He acted as a father figure to me and to so many other young men in need of guidance and direction," recalls Mr. Gash. "And this is how he taught us to act as young men."