

Respected by his peers for his honesty and integrity, Lemuel “Coach” Jones was a strong role model for thousands of young men for the three decades he taught and coached in Hendersonville. And for many, he was the local face of equal rights for African American education.

From 1962-1965, Jones taught physical education and coached football and basketball at the Ninth Avenue School, which was the segregated 1st-12th grade school for African American students in Henderson, Transylvania, and Polk counties. Eric Gash, assistant principal at the current Hendersonville High, writes that his mother had been a student of Jones at the Ninth Avenue School and both she and Eric – who was also eventually in Jones’ P.E. class at Hendersonville Junior High – recall Jones teaching his students life lessons on perseverance and follow-through, respect, and loyalty.

“His legacy is far-reaching and crosses generations, cultures, and societal divides,” said Gash.

When Hendersonville City Schools began integrating in 1965, Jones moved to the district’s central office and was influential as an ambassador for the African American students as they transitioned into what had once been “all white” schools. Through 1971, he was key in leading integration efforts, as Hendersonville Junior High and Hendersonville High began welcoming students of all races.

One of the few African-American educators from the Ninth Avenue School to continue teaching in the newly integrated system, Jones began teaching health and physical education at Hendersonville Junior High in 1971. Jones coached varsity basketball and football for the entirety of his 15 years at the junior high.

Remembered by his students and athletes as a strict disciplinarian, Jones set the same high expectations for everyone. “He showed no favoritism and treated us all the same,” writes Derek Hawkins, one of Jones’ former student athletes. “ His timing was intentional, sometimes allowing us to resolve our own issues and at times, drawing us back to keep our minds on the task at hand.”

Gash remembers one such instance, which illustrates Jones’ powerful command of respect among his students. “I recall a time when two guys were about to get into an altercation in the locker room, and Coach said that whoever won would have to face him next,” writes Gash. “Nobody wanted to do that! Needless to say, that ended the confrontation right away.”

Despite being a strict disciplinarian – or perhaps because of it – Jones was regarded by young men throughout the decade as the positive male role model they needed in their lives, teaching them how to carry themselves with dignity. “Athletics was a tool for him to mold us into acceptable young men,” says Hawkins. “Somehow, he understood our needs and how to shape us.”

“He made his students better people,” says Bobby Wilkins, principal at Hendersonville High. Those same students rush toward Jones whenever he attends Bearcat athletic events, clamoring around the Bearcat legacy.

Laughter said, “Lemuel Jones is the type of man that transforms lives by the relationships he builds with them.”