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INTEGRATION & LINCOLN MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL

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Coach Eddie Shannon

Up until integration in 1969, Lincoln Memorial was the only high school for black students in Manatee County. Moody Johnson remembers starting at Lincoln Memorial in 7th grade: “Every morning we had devotion and prayer” and there was a strong focus on academics. “Football, basketball, all the sports expected excellence too, but academics were what you were measured by.”

Despite the emphasis on academics, football was very important at Lincoln Memorial. According to the 2009 documentary “Through the Tunnel,” Coach Eddie Shannon started coaching football at LMHS in 1955 and became a father figure for much of the student body. He established a curfew for the players and recalled how he’d “make sure that they were in bed” by driving through the neighborhood. If a player broke curfew, the whole team would deal a punishment they called running the gauntlet: all your teammates would have the chance “to tackle you or just kinda rough you up,” Shannon explained. Coach Shannon made sure his boys understood that there was

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more to life than football: "First, you gotta learn to be a good citizen."

When the US 41 overpass was built, the highway separated the school from their athletic fields, so a tunnel was put in under the highway. In the documentary, NFL great Henry Lawrence (another LMHS attendee) says this was the best thing that could have happened for Lincoln Memorial's football team. The tunnel became an inspiration and a key aspect of their pregame ritual: they'd sing prayers as they walked through and "it did something for us... it was a powerful thing." Lawrence claimed that when he heard the crowd of fans cheering as they emerged from the tunnel, he knew how the gladiators felt when entering the coliseum.

In 1954, Brown vs. the Board of Education ruled that separate but equal was inherently unequal and that schools should be integrated with all deliberate speed. All six of Moody Johnson's years at LMHS occurred after this pivotal court case, but still years before integration. As narrator in the documentary, he points out that " 'with all deliberate speed' turned out to mean as slow as possible." Fifteen years after the ruling, Manatee County started integration in earnest by phasing out Lincoln Memorial High School and sending most of those students to Manatee High- whether or not that's where they wanted to go. "Being from North of the River has always described more than a geographical place." While necessary, integration meant that many LMHS students were pulled out of a school where they felt a sense of pride and belonging and tossed into an unfamiliar environment.

Coach Shannon remembers being at home sick that very first day. He received a call from Manatee High principal: " 'Eddie, I think you need to get over here,' I said 'I got the flu.' He said 'Well bring it with you.' " When Coach Shannon arrived, Manatee High School was in the middle of a riot. He lectured the players on how it was up to them to pull this school together: "You can't be black and you can't be

historical buildings. Tours are free and held at 2pm every day that the Park is open.



white, you just gotta be a football player.” Coach Shannon made sure his players knew that they had a responsibility to their team and their school to stop the fighting and “tie the school together.”

Our local integration story isn't a fairy tale: sacrifices were made by kids who had no say in the matter and it still didn't fix everything. It was a struggle, and it was mainly the black students who had to adjust. Moody Johnson graduated from LMHS in 1965 along with 117 other students and 26 adults who had gone back to school to get their diplomas. His class is still close today. The Lincoln Memorial he describes shared a special sense of kinship that isn't evident in many graduating classes. While it wasn't an easy path to trod, the story of those first loyal Trojans who were sent across the River is still a story of triumph. Coach Shannon said it best: “The first year of integration brought people together who had never been together in their lives. You can't just put them together; they have to put themselves together. And that's what they did.”

To learn about Moody Johnson's experiences growing up in Palmetto, [Click Here.](#)

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