

Between Us

"If Ligon's Trees Could Talk ..."

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As the students rolled away on buses from the west side of Ligon GT Middle School on the last day of school in June 1998, the bulldozers rolled in on the north side of the school to reshape the landscape. The million-dollar renovation project had begun. Three sixty-foot willow oaks were felled. These tall, noble trees, once symbols of strength and stability, were gone in a matter of hours, victims of a needed expansion. In one afternoon their story ended, their "memories" were lost. Teachers realized in horror that they needed to capture leaves and some tree cross sections, or tree cookies, to remember the trees that had been there so long. With the last traces of the trees safely tucked away inside the school, the teachers began to speculate, "If these trees could have talked, what would they have said?"

The personified trees quickly became symbolic of Ligon — strong and vibrant, but vulnerable to damage without the protection of those who know its proud heritage and appreciate its potential future contributions. Thus, the quest began to capture Ligon's past, record it, and learn from it to guide its future. Five Ligon teachers and three professors from North Carolina State University (NCSU) joined an active Ligon High School alumni association that had championed this cause for years. Everyone involved set out to determine the defining moments in the school's history and identify the significant people and events. Participants sought ways to record and communicate the history. They hoped that it would influence current and future Ligon students to treasure the school's rich heritage as Ligon alumni had done for years; gain respect for education; and

adopt the values of perseverance, determination, and service to the community inherent in that heritage. Also, the participants hoped the recorded history would influence local school and community leaders to invest resources in the school, building on its strong foundation to maintain it as a vital educational and community influence.

Defining moments ... each life, organization, and institution has them. Ligon's defining moments have always shaped it as an institution of academic excellence that is central to the community. During Ligon's history, the student population has changed dramatically. The community has grown to include the county instead of just the city, but the tradition of academic excellence and community service remains constant.

Ligon's first defining moment was its inception in 1953 as the premier high school for all African American students in the Raleigh City School System. It was named after a prominent educational, religious, and community leader, John W. Ligon. The school benefited from his strong leadership and soon developed a reputation for academic excellence, championship athletics, and a broad arts program. Students attending Ligon were known as the "Little Blues." There was no school mascot, but one was not needed; the name stood on its own. Educators in the high school are remembered for their knowledge of content, their tough academic standards, and their deep concern and compassion for their students. They instilled in their students the value of education and service to mankind. Also, the educators encouraged students to set important goals and work hard to fulfill them. Parents worked closely with the school, supporting it in every way. Students felt cared

for and supported by the entire African American community all across the city. Everyone in the city knew the students and what they did, good and bad. Few students caused trouble in school for the same reason — Ligon had a proud reputation to uphold. Ligon students adhered to high standards and worked hard to make their teachers and parents proud during a time when many people in America did not recognize the rights of African Americans and limited opportunities and resources available to them. In spite of these circumstances, educators at Ligon High School defined an institution that built young men and women of strong character who were academically prepared to make great contributions to mankind.

Another defining moment came in 1971 when, as a result of desegregation, Ligon became J.W. Ligon Junior High School and part of the consolidated Wake County System. The transition was difficult for the students, the school, and the community. Through busing, the schools were desegregated. The resulting diaspora robbed the African American community of its high school and created alienation and distrust. Nevertheless, Ligon Junior High School continued its proud tradition of academic excellence and began to redefine itself to include students bused from all over the county. Now, a different student population was proud to be called the "Little Blues." They grew in character and knowledge at Ligon and left to exert a positive influence in their communities.

In 1982 the winds of change threatened the existence of Ligon as a school. Community leaders and alumni rallied to protect the school and its name. J.W. Ligon GT Magnet Middle School opened that fall, serving a base population from

its local neighborhood and magnet students from all over the county. Magnet students were attracted by content classes for the academically gifted and a wide array of elective classes that included expert instruction in the visual and performing arts. Since that time, Ligon has thrived as a magnet school and continued to uphold its reputation for academic and artistic excellence and community service. Currently, it appears to be facing another defining moment as attractive new magnet schools open and the school system changes its philosophy of student assignment. Thus, the quest to preserve Ligon's proud history and to redefine its future became important to the teachers, students and alumni of the Ligon community.

From this need grew the Ligon History Project, an interdisciplinary project in which alumni, teachers, NCSU professors and their graduate students, and community partners collaborated to facilitate student investigation of Ligon's history. Central to the project was the support of and interactions with the Ligon High School alumni. During the first interaction, a demonstration interview conducted by NCSU Professor Anna Wilson, students appeared aloof. Some even expressed their frustration with comments like, "What does this have to do with me?" With continued contact, the school's history — their history — began to unfold. As students started to identify with the alumni and Ligon's history, their sense of mission intensified. They requested more time with the alumni and treasured every moment, asking probing questions, taking copious notes, and seeking ways to communicate the story. Teachers and professors were immediately excited about the project. The first planning meeting with the alumni sparked numerous conversations, and the many memories shared generated immediate enthusiasm for the project.

Gathering background information about Ligon's history was a challenge. Students in Betty Mackie's journalism class, Neville Sinclair's Wake County history class, and a GIS class taught by Rita Hagevik and Ann Thompson, created lists of questions about the school, the city, and past lifestyles. Information needed to answer their questions was not readily available. Therefore, graduate students studying historiography under Dr. Anna Wilson gleaned information from primary source materials in state, university, and public archives. Community partners provided information and geographic data. Journalism

students facilitated by Betty Mackie and graduate student Eloise Payton collected oral histories in 14 interviews with Ligon High alumni. Those interviews were recorded on audio and videotape, then transcribed by Payton. Students in the GIS class interviewed Leonard Hunter, a 1955 graduate, several times, focusing their questions on geographic information. GIS students also studied the history of Raleigh through maps at the Raleigh GIS office and the North Carolina State Archives. Dr. Candy Beal, NCSU professor and author of *Raleigh, the First 200 Years*, shared the city's history with students on the Great Raleigh Trolley Tour. Students from the three classes shared these resources as a basis for their projects. Dr. Marsha Alibrandi coordinated collaborative efforts between the teachers, university, and community partners; acquired grant funding; and found technical assistance for GIS and archival research.

Ligon historians created several products that document the early history of the school and its community. The journalism class published a book of oral histories, *Capturing the Past to Guide the Future*, and a videotape of interview highlights and memorabilia. Students studying the county history wrote biographies of two prominent leaders and documented the history of several buildings in the area. GIS students created a GIS model of Mr. Hunter's mental map of Raleigh in the 1950s that showed the city from the African American perspective. This map emphasizes churches, schools, parks, the hospital, and shopping areas frequented by African Americans, whereas traditional maps emphasize areas of the city important to the majority population. Small groups of students worked hard to enter the names of all Ligon graduates into a database. Four students interviewed Ligon alumnus Dr. Charles Haywood, NCSU Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, and documented his life with a focus on the role of education in his success and his advice for middle school students planning to go to college. Ginny Owens' science students studied dendrochronology by using the tree cookies from the willow oak and created a display, "Ligon's History in the Rings." All of these products were displayed in an exposition held in the school Media Center in June 1999. Students shared their work with alumni, teachers, professors, parents, and honored guests including the Governor. The intergenerational event was charged with magic as everyone celebrated Ligon's contributions to

its students and the community. These projects and the school's emerging history were all documented and recorded electronically to create a virtual history of the school <<http://www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/cep/ligon/about/history/intro.htm>>.

Ligon historians continue to document the history of this proud school. This year journalism students are interviewing more alumni and will publish a second edition of *Capturing the Past to Guide the Future*. Wake County history students are constructing a model of the school and community. Science students are using GIS models to document the natural history of the campus, including detailed information about a small class study area and a campus-wide vegetation model with detailed data collected about the trees. One tree cookie will be professionally mounted, and significant events in history will be identified with corresponding rings in a display that will become the first exhibit in a school museum to be housed in the Media Center. Next year the drama teacher plans to host an artist-in-residence to help students write a drama about the school's history. Future documentation will continue to be shaped by the skills and talents of future Ligon historians.

The Ligon historians have just begun to express the many stories that the campus trees could tell if they could talk. Collaborating with adults to document the school's history has allowed students to apply their academic skills in a problem-based learning model. This community service has had many extra benefits for all involved. Many racial, cultural, and generational gaps have narrowed as participants build relationships. Some of the wounds inflicted when the high school was taken from the African American community by desegregation have begun to heal. Some alumni and local community members have become involved with the middle school, a first step in restoring the school to its place as the center of the local community. Students involved with the alumni are exposed to their values, including perseverance, determination, respect for education, and a strong desire to make a positive contribution to society. Students involved in the project take pride in their heritage as Ligon students. All Ligon historians share the vision that the noble history of the school will guide future defining moments as future Ligon students go forth to make a positive impact on society.