

# T.C. WILLIAMS HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF '72

*"Success is the result of people pulling together to meet common goals."*

— John C. Maxwell

**M**y brothers and sister and I had the best of both worlds— summers on the family farm in southwest Michigan and the school year spent in the shadow of our nation's capitol. It was an exciting time to grow up. Life in suburban Virginia was the embodiment of the American dream, and the popular culture of the day was still a safe place for kids to play. As fun and adventurous as our school days were, we would not have considered them noteworthy of a Hollywood screenplay. Certainly no one in my high school class would have imagined the events of our senior year would be portrayed in a *Walt Disney* movie, and that millions would find inspiration in the story of our winning football team. Even so, the lessons of that senior year were all about how to *play the game*, and not just football, but *the game of life*, getting along with people different from ourselves. To succeed, we learned the value of teamwork.

It all began in the summer of '71 when the Alexandria, Virginia school board decided to implement a voluntary desegregation plan for the city's three high schools. We knew it was a possibility in the spring when we elected class officers for the following school year. I was elected vice president of the *Francis C. Hammond High School* senior class, and I pledged in my campaign speech that if the school board decided to move forward with its plan, I would do my best to help make it work. The city-wide proposal called for consolidating the junior and senior classes of *Hammond*, *George Washington* and *T. C. Williams* high schools into one large senior high at the *T. C.* campus. There would be nearly a thousand students in the proposed mega school's first graduating class. We would have three sets of class officers that year and one combined

## REMEMBERING THE TITANS



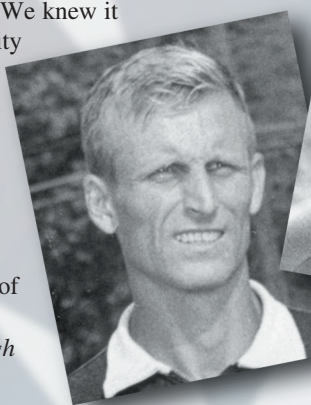
*A Personal Reflection*  
by Cameron S. Brown



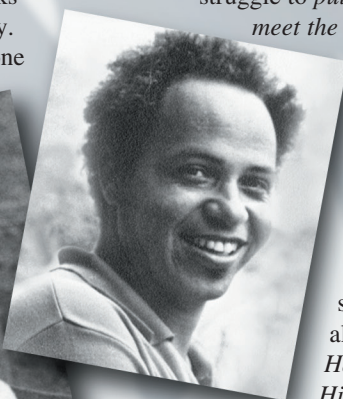
GERRY BERTIER

football team the likes of which Northern Virginia had never seen.

My P. E. instructor, the veteran award-winning *Hammond* coach Bill Yoast, would be passed over for the choice appointment of *T. C.*'s new head football coach. That job would go to Coach Herman Boone, and that's where *Walt Disney* picks up the story. Coach Boone



COACH YOAST



COACH BOONE

would employ the "whole team" concept that would enable all members to play. And play they did. The team finished first in the state and second in the nation. Nineteen players would make honor teams. Number 42, the talented All-American linebacker Gerry Bertier, a friend since second grade, would be elected team captain. After leading the *Titans* to a perfect 13-0 season, and Alexandria's first state championship, Gerry would be paralyzed from the chest down in a tragic car

accident. Nine years later, his car would be hit by a drunk driver and Gerry would be killed at the young age of 27.

Although the *Walt Disney* movie, starring Denzel Washington as Coach Boone, takes liberties with characters and events, it does capture the spirit of the team and its struggle to *pull together to meet the challenge of a common goal*.

Gerry and his *Hammond Admirals* relinquished a long-standing allegiance to *Hammond High* to take the name of their cross-town rivals, the *T. C. Titans*,

and the rest is their heartwarming story of accomplishment and success.

When I speak to elementary and high school students, I always ask if they've seen the movie, *Remember the Titans*. Of course, many hands go up, and I ask them if they liked the film. The overwhelming response is an emphatic "yes!" Then I pull out my *T. C. Williams* class of '72 yearbook and tell them I liked it too for a very special reason. It was my school! With a look of amazement on their faces, I

show them photos of what the real *Titans* looked like and then we take a moment to talk about the message of the film— the importance of learning how to get along with one another.

The enduring legacy of the *T. C. Titans* is one of exceptional teamwork that puts entrenched differences aside for the common good. It is about relationships that grow in the crucible of a shared experience. It is about unity and changed lives. The positive impact of the *Titans'* winning example has been felt by the city of Alexandria ever since, and now with the help of *Walt Disney Studios*, it reaches around the world.

One of the most dramatic scenes in the film takes place off the football field and on the battlefield at Gettysburg. The team makes a forced run to the Pennsylvania cemetery, and for a brief and sobering moment, the players are reminded that they share a rich heritage of sacrifice and purpose. It is a reminder to all of us that to be an American is to be a team player. Citizenship requires participation. It is not a spectator sport. Theodore Roosevelt said it best: *"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them*

*better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly... who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."*\*

At my 30th class reunion, I asked Coach Yoast if the film depiction of the Gettysburg scene is true. It is such a powerful part of the film I was reluctant to learn the truth for fear it might break the spell. Still tall and trim, Coach Yoast told me the team didn't jog to the cemetery site. They took a bus. But he did say the movie dialogue is close to what was actually said there. That was good to know, because the battlefield at Gettysburg is "hallowed ground." Being false to the truth on that consecrated earth is something not even a Hollywood screenplay should permit.

People often ask how much of the *Disney* movie is true. This much is true— a group of kids were thrown into a situation that had no precedent in their lives. They learned to overcome prejudice and petty rivalry by the discipline of hard work, respect for others, and by a transforming desire to win for the good of the team. Their lives were forever changed by that experience, and so was the class of '72.

\* From the speech titled *Citizenship in a Republic* given at the Sorbonne in Paris, France on April 23, 1910

### About Cameron S. Brown

Born in Washington, D.C., Cameron S. Brown is a former member of the Michigan House of Representatives and the Michigan Senate. An independent consultant and keynote speaker, Cameron and his wife Helen reside in Southwest Michigan. He earned an MPA degree from Western Michigan University, and has a BA in History from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He also attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.