



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FOOTEDALE NATIVE TO BE HONORED WITH FIRST HOMETOWN LEGENDS MARKER

Uniontown, PA – To football fans across the country, Ernie Davis is a sports legend. In Footedale, he is the hometown boy made good.

Born in the small community in German Township in 1939, Davis moved to Elmira, N.Y., at the age of 12. A two-time All-American at Elmira Free Academy, he went on to play college football at Syracuse University and won a Heisman Trophy in 1961. Davis was the first African-American recipient of the award, college football's highest honor.

Davis died in 1963, but his legacy will live on in his hometown. He will be recognized as the first honoree of the Hometown Legends Project with a ceremony Friday at the neighborhood mailbox pavilion in Footedale.

Due to his achievements in football and the recognition he is receiving in his hometown area, Davis has earned the Fayette Faces and Places designation for May.

The Fayette Hometown Legends Project is a new program that has been launched to recognize and celebrate the contributions of local heroes and preserve the heritage of our community. The Hometown Legends Project aims to honor individuals who have made a significant impact on the community, and whose stories embody the values and traditions that make our area unique.

The project will be led by the Fayette Chamber of Commerce, which, in partnership with local community leaders, will work together to identify, verify, document, and honor the stories of local legends. Each legend chosen will be recognized with special signage.

"We are thrilled to launch this new project, which will help to preserve and celebrate the heritage of our beautiful county," said Muriel Nuttall, executive director of the Fayette Chamber of Commerce.

"Fayette County has a rich history, and there are many remarkable individuals who have made a lasting impact. The Hometown Legends Project will help to ensure that they are remembered and celebrated for generations to come."

Davis' honor comes after Dave Kacmar, a friend of some of Davis' family members, was inspired by a movie about Davis and got in touch with Fayette County Commissioner Vincent Vicites.

“Actually, how it got started was, they made a TV movie about Ernie. It was called ‘Express,’” Kacmar said.

Kacmar said after seeing the movie, he began to look into Davis’ life, especially after finding out the “Elmira Express,” as he was known in his high school days, originally hailed from the New Salem area.

Through further research, Kacmar located Davis’ only sibling, a sister named Angela who still resides in the Uniontown area and married into the McLee family. Kacmar happened to be friends with many of the McLees.

“I got in contact with them, and it just so happened I was introduced to Ernie’s sister, who gave me all the information I needed,” he said.

That information included the fact that though Davis is often said to be from New Salem or Buffington in Menallen Township, he actually was born in Footedale in German Township.

German Township Supervisor LC Otto said it’s common for Footedale residents to be mistakenly listed as residents of Menallen Township because many have a New Salem mailing address. Otto said he is pleased that German Township can do something to honor one of its own.

“Any time that we can honor one of our citizens, whether present or past, it’s always a great thing to do,” he said.

Otto said that is especially true when recognition is long overdue, as it is in Davis’ case. “It’s the least we can do,” he said.

Armed with information, Kacmar sought some help to get his plan to honor Davis off the ground.

“I knew I couldn’t handle it myself, so I called (Vicites) up and asked if he wanted to get on the bandwagon with me,” Kacmar said.

Vicites had heard of Davis and readily agreed to help.

“I just felt strongly that Ernie Davis, with his athletic ability and the fact that he was born and raised until he was 12 years old in Fayette County, should get the recognition he deserved,” Vicites said.

He took the idea to fellow commissioners Scott Dunn and Dave Lohr, chairman, who gave it their full support.

“It’s a true honor to commemorate the great Ernie Davis,” Dunn said. “Fayette County boasts numerous athletic accolades and standouts, and this plaque will preserve the history of one of them. Ernie Davis, born right here in Footedale, eventually went on to be a prominent running back from Syracuse University and made history in 1961 when he was the first African-American to win the Heisman Trophy. He followed up that honor by being selected by the Washington Redskins as the first pick of the 1962 NFL draft. Fayette County is proud to be the birthplace and childhood home of Ernie Davis.”

Lohr said Davis is an inspirational figure.

“I always say that we have great people in Fayette County, and Ernie Davis is yet another example,” he said. “What an inspiring story we have in this Fayette County native, whose life was tragically cut short.

Ernie didn't let race define him – he was passionate about playing ball, any kind of ball, and he didn't let the fact that he was only one of three African-Americans on the Syracuse team stop him from excelling. And excel he did! He was passionate about his sport, but he was also passionate about people, and he lived with an attitude of gratitude. Shortly before dying, he wrote that he didn't feel unlucky because he had more in his 23 years than most people get in a lifetime. We should all be inspired by his story.”

The project also received support from state Sen. Pat Stefano.

“I'm excited to see the Hometown Legends project come to fruition, and honoring Ernie Davis' legacy is a fantastic start,” Stefano said. “It's incredible to think that such an important story in our history started right here in German Township. Congratulations to the Davis family for this well-deserved honor.”

Vicites worked closely with Kacmar, as well as the Fayette Chamber of Commerce, to come up with a plan to erect a marker in Davis' hometown designating him as the first honoree of the Hometown Legends Program.

“We started the Hometown Legends Program about the same time, and we decided to make him the first recipient,” Vicites said.

Additionally, Vicites said he nominated Davis for the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame, into which he will be inducted this summer.

George von Benko, executive chairman and co-founder of the Fayette County Sports Hall of Fame, said Davis returned to his hometown area every summer after moving to New York. He said he met Davis briefly in 1961 when he and fellow local standout Sandy Stephens passed through Uniontown on their way to the Heisman Trophy presentation.

“I think (Davis' honor) is tremendous,” von Benko said. “I think it's long overdue. A lot of people know (Davis) after the movie 'Express' came out, but there are still a lot of people out there that don't know the Ernie Davis story.”

Vicites and von Benko are among those who want to see that change.

“He's a great athlete, and he got his start in Fayette County,” Vicites said. “I'm pleased that he's going to be rewarded with this plaque and also be in the Sports Hall of Fame because I think he deserves it.”

The Hometown Legends Project is currently seeking nominations for local heroes, who may be living or deceased. Nominees should have a strong connection to the community and have made a significant impact in one or more areas, such as business, education, arts and culture, sports, philanthropy, or public service.

To nominate a local hero or learn more about the project, visit our Facebook Page @FayetteLegends. The project team encourages all members of the community to get involved and help celebrate the rich heritage of Fayette County.

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For more information, contact Kristi Kassimer Harper, Public Relations Specialist, at 724-437-4571, kkassimer@fayettecountypa.info or Jamie Rankin, Journalist, at 724-437-4571, jamierankin13@gmail.com.