

“The Life of Langston High School”

They could just barely hear it.

It was just a little bit on the air. It was some music, maybe? But it was enough to know that they were coming.

And in Johnson City, on their Main Street, people started to gather their children around and get on the sidewalks. They threw their windows open from their businesses and leaned out. They started looking down the street. They knew they would see them shortly. And suddenly they could hear more of them. Clarinets, oboes, French horns, tubas, trumpets, trombones, and those drums.

And then, they could see the uniforms. All the children began to run up and down and now everybody was out of their window. Everybody was clamoring to see those blue uniforms with the fringe and gold and a gold cape on the back. Those low hats of blue with some gold right there in the front. And they were marching. That big “L” on the back, Langston High School, marching on with the drum major. Far enough ahead to make sure no trouble would be in their path.

Marching they were, and here they came. The Golden Tigers! Langston's Golden Tigers! And they played and played. They stopped right in front of the bank. And there in front of the bank, with all the people that were in the bank now, outside, watching, they did a performance right there. And then, they finished the rest of their walk over to Carver football field. It was time to play football.

Whenever you hear anyone who's an alumni of Langston talk about Langston High School, the first thing they mention is that band. And the band members, sometimes as low as 20, sometimes as much as 54, well, they remembered that walk through town.

But that's not all that Langston had to offer. They had a Glee Club. They had the Future Homemakers of America. They had artists. They had sports teams. They had coach Paul Chrisman, who was so good as the head coach of the Golden Tigers, that he'd often taken that football team to the regionals. They had a girls' basketball team, and were the only school, high school, in the area that had a girls' basketball team. The other colored schools had girls' basketball teams, but none of the white schools.

Considering, looking at the comparisons, well, Langston was accredited before the white schools, high schools, were accredited. And Langston had more master's degree teachers than any of the white schools did.

At that school, they were able to express themselves in amazing ways. They had art festivals, and they brought in people that were speakers on a regular basis. There was always, each week, there was a note or an editorial that was done about Langston and all the things in there. The honor roll

was put on there in the newspaper often. You could always hear a little something and see a little insight into what was happening at Langston High School. It was the place people loved to be.

You started when you were seventh grade, and you walked through the arch. The arch said, "Enter to learn, depart to serve." And that motto was put into every child over and over again. Enter to learn, depart to serve. And when you had a chance, when it was your turn to walk under that arch, you knew. You knew you had entered a home that was just like your own.

It was family in so many ways. The teachers were hard, there was no doubt, and they knew your family. So if there was trouble to be had, your family knew before you ever got home. Not only that, they believed in you. And they ensured that you were going to get a fine education and go off to college, many times with scholarships in hand. It was a place you felt safe and secure. And at a time of segregation, well, it was a place that you never worried about that.

Then in 1964, there were 13 girls that were taken from Langston High School and placed into Science Hill High School, the white school. Quietly, they moved those girls in. In 1964, Johnson City was far, far, far behind the all deliberate speed, which that 1954 Supreme Court decision had given. They had made a plan five years ago, but they really hadn't stuck to that grade by grade plan. And they'd been taken to court for it over and over and over again. Finally, these girls were stepping their toe and people would see what it was like.

There was no trouble at all. And in '65, the beginning of the school year, a new minister moved down from Maine to take over as minister of the AME Zion Church in Johnson City. He, being from Maine, immediately took his daughter to the school that was in his zone. That was North Junior High School. And at that door, he was turned away and told to send her to Langston. And he asked why. There had been a Supreme Court decision. He should be there. And every day, he brought his daughter to knock on the doors of North Junior High School, only to be turned away.

Finally, another court case came, and the superintendent and the board decided they would ask the parents where did they want their children to go? So to all 1,200 parents of Langston High School, North Junior High School, and Science Hill High School, they sent, where would you like your children to go? If they were junior high, would you like them to go to North or Langston? If they were senior high, would you like them to go to Science Hill or Langston?

Well, they reported out what the results were. Only 104 parents wanted their children to go to Langston. That just happened to be about the amount of students at the school at the time. All the other parents, well, they wanted their children *not* to go to Langston. And so the board said, well, this is what the parents have said, we need to close Langston. And so it was decided in April that the school would be closed.

It would not be until May that the teachers would know what would happen with them. The teachers that did not live in Johnson City were immediately let go. And then other teachers were moved to place to place. Coach Crisman was sent over to Science Hill as an assistant coach for the JV team. It was their first time to have a JV team now that they had enough sophomores

because Langston was there. The principal, Mrs. Rachel Carson, the principal of Langston was sent over as a counselor at Science Hill. Callie Red, one of the youngest of the teachers there, she was sent to North Junior High School, and she was not even given a classroom, but told to float from place to place. And when she sat in the teachers' lounge at the large table where all the other teachers sat, they made sure that the empty seat always had books in it so she couldn't sit with them.

Their experiences were far different than they had been at Langston High School. And the music stopped.

But the Langston alumni were not willing to let go of what they had felt in that school. The Langston alumni did come out departing to serve. Some of them served on the city council, served on different boards. They became doctors, lawyers, insurance brokers. They became teachers and nurses. And they loved their school. So they tried to purchase the school from the city. Over time, they often went in. At first, Langston was made into the vocational school and \$10,000 was unexpectedly raised. So by 1966, they had upgraded that school. Then later, it was used as a storage place. And the Langston alumni asked over and over, can we not buy our school back? They had decided they wanted to make it an education center. The answer was no, again and again and again.

And as there was more and more deterioration of the building, eventually the city sold it. And the alumni quickly picked it up, so they could make it into a center, a community center, an education center. And so it is. If you go to Johnson City and you go over on Elm Street, you will see the arch. "Enter to learn, depart to serve." And when you walk through that arch, you can come inside of the building. The building that is the Langston High School, now it is the Langston Center. It was slow in getting its start, but now everyone seems to use it. And if you go upstairs, you will be in the same gym that was used by the girls' basketball team and the boys. You'll be able to have events in there. And all downstairs in those classrooms are still used to teach people today.

And, along the walls, you can see a picture of the band. You can see pictures of the Glee Club, of the graduates, even of a prom. And you can see on a pole, that uniform. The blue with the yellow cape and that low hat. The music has begun.

But as I visited there, I noted the plaque. And the plaque talked about when the school began. And it said that in 1965, the school was closed. But it was the last line. The last line said this: "In that same year, 1965, Johnson City Schools were completely integrated." And I thought, why did it not say: "Johnson City Schools completely eliminated all colored schools?" It was as if Johnson City Schools didn't know the culture and the value of the colored schools, of the teachers, of those organizations that were there. It was as if it wasn't important.

I'm going to give you a moment to talk about this, but before we do, I just want to share with you about the wording, desegregation and integration. Now, integration is when you take one group

of people from one place, and another group of people from another place, and you take some from here and you put them here. And then from this one, you take some from here and put them there. You integrate; you combine in various ways.

Desegregation means...hmm, this school, yeah, we'll just close it. And everybody in here goes there. And no, you don't need to bring along your mascot or your uniforms or your band instruments. Or even your girls' team. We have everything you need right here. And you should be grateful for it because we have what you need.

Integration, desegregation. We need to know those words better, and see how they are described in our history.