



An American Story in Black and White

RETIRED WITH PURPOSE

**“YOU PUT AWAY YOUR GUILT, AND
I’LL PUT AWAY MY ANGER, AND WE
JUST MAY LEARN SOMETHING.”**

- Jimmie Lee Kirkpatrick

JIMMIE LEE KIRKPATRICK IS ARGUABLY ONE OF THE BEST HIGH SCHOOL RUNNING BACKS IN THE HISTORY OF CHARLOTTE.

On paper, he should have been a shoo-in as a selection for the Shrine Bowl and a top college recruit. His junior year he averaged 15 yards every time he touched the ball. He scored five touchdowns in a single game.

But there was one problem: Jimmie played football at the all-black high school Second Ward High School. In Charlotte in 1964, that was a problem for recruiters.

For his senior year, Jimmie Lee had a choice. Because of a boundary shift in the school redistricting, he could stay at Second Ward, where he would undoubtedly remain a celebrated football star, or he could transfer to predominantly white Myers Park High, where he would have more exposure to opportunities—and racism.

He dreamed of a football life after high school, so Jimmie chased those opportunities and chose Myers Park. He excelled on the field. By the end of the season, he’d been nominated for the Shrine Bowl.

At that time, no Black men had ever been selected for the Shrine Bowl. And so, Jimmie’s name wasn’t included on the roster. A lawsuit followed, citing the only reason for Jimmie’s exclusion was his color. After years of debates, motions and hearings, the Shrine Bowl was finally integrated in 1966.

In 2013, the Charlotte Observer ran a story on Jimmie, his history as a Charlotte football star and his role in integrating the Shrine Bowl. After the story ran, a man emailed the Observer, telling the staff that he had attended high school with Jimmie and wished to reconnect after 50 years.

That man’s name? Hugh “De” Kirkpatrick.

The two men talked by phone. And when De said his name, Jimmie knew his family.

It turns out that De’s great-great-grandfather – a white farmer also named Hugh – held Jimmie’s great-great-great-grandfather as a slave in the mid-1800s.

THE TWO MEN MET SOON AFTER. THEY DEVELOPED A CONNECTION THAT WENT BEYOND THEIR SHARED LAST NAME.

Together, they dug up their families’ parallel history. It wasn’t always easy; in fact, at times what they learned was downright painful.

But they persevered. Eventually, they realized that they were piecing together more than just their story: It was the story of Charlotte. Of North Carolina. Of the South. Of America.

Together, they hit the road. They shared their story at churches and organizations and schools,



hoping that it would act as a teaching and healing mechanism for racial wounds that still plague our nation.

The recent protests are a reminder that racial inequality isn't part of our past; it's also part of our present. We have much work to do to reach a place where everyone has access to the same opportunities and chance for success in our country.

But as Jimmie and De show us, growth doesn't stop at a certain age. Our views of the world – and ourselves – can change no matter how long we've lived or where life takes us.

THEY ALSO DEMONSTRATE THAT EACH OF US HAS THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE THE WORLD AROUND US IN SOME SMALL WAY,

no matter what our age or our history. Our stories collectively make up the American story – told in Black, White, and every shade in between.

In their words

What have you learned since this discovery and through the process?

JIMMIE: I've learned that history and truth are essential if we are to move forward as a nation regarding Race and Justice. As James Baldwin said, "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."

DE: I was ignorant and naïve about my paternal family's slaveholding past. ... I learned I was on a path that I had to follow. I learned how to talk with Jimmie, his friends, and family about racism and slavery. I learned to trust and respect Jimmie as a friend and as a brother.

What personal growth have you noticed since you developed this relationship?

JIMMIE: The knowledge and clearer understanding of my family's history has provided personal strength I never thought imaginable. De and I have developed a strong bond based on our family's history and mutual respect. This brotherhood has allowed me to view these complicated issues from other perspectives. The peculiar institution of slavery affected us all.

DE: It turned out Jimmie is the gift. I lost my only brother, Bobby, about 16 years ago to cancer. I miss him every day, but it turned out Jimmie and I are blood brothers. He's got some Irish in him, and my love for soul music since I was five years old proves I have some African roots.

How has forgiveness changed how you view yourself—and the world?

JIMMIE: My mother taught me long ago that the act of forgiveness is something you do for yourself. She would say forgiveness cleanses the soul. Forgiveness and acceptance are a conscious decision one makes to release feelings of resentment, whether it's deserved or not. Forgiveness is not forgetting or excusing. Empathy is something we all could use a little more of.

DE: I haven't come a long way down the road of forgiveness, because I am angry and upset about my slaveholding ancestral history. For the past four years, I have been writing a book about the psychology of the southern slave master. Since I had practiced forensic psychology for 35 years, it seemed natural to try to understand the Southern slaveholder's mind a wee bit. I am seeking a publisher.

How are you hoping to inspire others and what are you hoping others and the world can learn from your story?

JIMMIE: De and I believe our story is one of healing. We hope to demonstrate through our story what it takes to have a positive dialogue about race and slavery in America in a safe and productive manner.

DE: From the beginning...Jimmie and I were bowled over by the impact our story had on most people. We are awed by how our story, as a slavery-based story, as a Southern story, touches so many people, deep into their own histories. As can be seen clearly in America's tumultuous, current world, people are hungry for learning the truth about the trauma slavery left on all of us.