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A Titan to remember

Football coach Herman Boone continues to fight racism

Coach Herman Boone took one step into a room featuring racist images and he paused.

"I lived it," Boone said. "It never leaves you. You forgive, but you don't forget."

Boone, the man immortalized by Denzel Washington in the film 'Remember the Titans,' visited the Art Center of Battle Creek on Monday to view the 'Hateful Things' exhibit. The exhibit, on loan from the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University, features artifacts with racist images.

Boone, who was in town to speak to the public at Harper Creek High School later in the day, said it was important for people to see the exhibit and to talk about the relics from our past.

"I know that these artifacts bring back memories. But they are necessary," Boone said. "You can not hide the truth. It's history. These things happened. God allows a lot of things to happen for a reason. These things, I truly believe, happen so that the world now can understand from whence we came, and where we are going. Those of us who endured many injustices, it was a daily life thing for us."

Boone, a native of North Carolina, became the head coach at T.C. Williams in Alexandria, Virginia in 1971. Alexandria decided to totally integrate its school system that year, and Boone became its first consolidated head coach. The team went on to win the 1971 Virginia State Championship and was ranked second in the nation by national polls. The story inspired the 2000 Disney film, 'Remember the Titans.'

Scott Durham, part of the community coalition that helped bring Boone to Battle Creek, said the legendary head coach was at the top of the list for guest speakers.

"If you looked at the things that came together for this project, there isn't an American alive today that better explains the concept of celebrating our progress," Durham said. "I think almost everyone has seen the movie and recognizes what he did and the magic he created with that team in 1971."

Boone casually walked into the exhibit and began talking. Soon enough, a small crowd of 15 gathered to listen to the charismatic coach give an impromptu speech on racism.

"Parents can teach their children to hate, but they can also teach them to love," Boone said. "Because children can limit the attitudes of their parents. Even attitudes that parents didn't know they had themselves, children pick up on that. There's an old poem that goes, 'How careful I must be, a little fellow watches me.' Children pick up on attitudes, even things you don't see."

Boone said that communication is vital to moving forward in regards to race relations. Although 'Remember the Titans' did take some cinematic liberties, the scene where players are forced to get to know each other did stem from real life.

"I made the Titans talk to one another -- boys who had not been within touching distance of a person of another race," Boone said. "I made them meet and talk to each other. They had to meet, (for two hours), they had to meet over 106 kids who they knew nothing about."

Boone, who is retired from coaching, added that a few portions of the Titans story were altered for Hollywood. His team did visit Gettysburg, and it did win a game in dramatic come-from-behind fashion, but it didn't happen in the state championship. The Titans won the title by beating Lewis 27-0, with Lewis netting minus-5 total yards on offense.

"Now who would want to watch that movie," Boone joked.

Ever the coach, Boone took a short break from speaking only to draw up a play on a napkin for Lakeview junior varsity football head coach Cody Japinga.

Linda Holderman, Executive Director for the Art Center of Battle Creek, hoped that coach Boone's visit would spur others to join the 300-plus who have already viewed the 'Hateful Things' exhibit. She said the seeing the artifacts up close can be an eye-opener for a generation not used to such blatant racism and hatred.

"It's hard to relate to it, that's why it's nice that they can see the real thing," Holderman said. "That's why you have museums, so you can see the real objects and learn from it that way."

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