Virgil Hawkins: Educator & Civil Rights Activist

Hardaway Law Firm

Virgil Hawkins Historical Society

Virgil Hawkins Bar Association of Polk County

Black Filmmakers of Central Florida

Kathleen High School Video and TV Production Team

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Black History Month Feb 27th

FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE

EVENT IS PRESENTED BY

The Hardaway Law Firm

The Virgil Hawkins Historical Society

The Virgil Hawkins Bar Association of Polk County

Black Filmmakers of Central Florida

Kathleen High School Video and TV Production Team

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Mu Zeta Lambda Chapter
Dear Friends:

Virgil Hawkins was a leading pioneer for the civil rights movement in the State of Florida. He broke the walls of race and segregation and made a profound impact on the education system. His contribution, though often overlooked, left a mark on society that continues to benefit us today.

It took many years for Virgil Hawkins to see the results of his efforts. He persevered however, because he was not striving merely for personal gain; he saw the bigger picture, and sought to create a better world for future generations. Today, we see the fruits of his labors all around us, in society and in our education system.

Virgil Hawkins was very passionate about equality in education because he knew how important a quality education was to the success of an individual. I also understand the importance of a quality education. That is why the Polk County Sheriff's Office goes above and beyond the expectations of a standard employer by offering a tuition reimbursement plan for our employees, thereby paying for their education.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office also offers salary incentives for those individuals who have chosen to obtain a higher education. By offering these options to our employees, I hope to encourage them to realize their dreams by furthering their education and advancing their careers.

A great example of patience, passion, and perseverance has been left for us. By seeking to emulate this example and work together, we will continue to create a brighter future for the coming generations, just as Virgil Hawkins inspired us to do.

Sincerely,

Grady Judd
Sheriff
Virgil Darnell Hawkins was a preacher's son who while at Bethune Cookman College in 1949 applied for admission to the University of Florida Law School. He and five other students applied to various colleges at the University and were all denied admission. Lawyers in Florida and lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed suit challenging the denials, thus beginning a nine year legal battle to open the doors of Florida's segregated public universities and colleges to Black Americans. The result of this legal and often life threatening battle was the admission of Blacks to the law school at the University of Florida and the integration of Florida's former all white institutions of higher learning.

In a companion case with Brown vs. Board of Education, the U.S. Supreme Court in 1957 ordered Florida to immediately admit Virgil Hawkins to its law school and once again the Florida Supreme refused to allow his admission. What followed was a remarkable unselfish act by the Civil Rights pioneer. Hawkins agreed with an offer made by the State that if he would withdraw his application to the University of Florida, other Black Americans would be admitted to attend the University. Virgil withdrew his application and the University of Florida admitted George H. Starke to its law school. Accordingly, on September 15, 1958 Starke entered college becoming the first Black student admitted to the University of Florida. After three semesters of harsh treatment, Starke withdrew from the University. George Allen applied in 1960, was admitted, and in 1962 became the first Black American student to graduate from the University of Florida and its law school.

Initially, Hawkins applied to law school at age 42. Although state higher education institutions were now integrated, he never got the opportunity to attend UF. Hawkins eventually graduated from the New England School of Law and was finally licensed to practice in Florida in 1977 at the age of 70.

As a consequence of his refusal to quit in the struggle for admission and the willingness to relinquish his "seat" to others, Florida state lawmakers created the first law school for Blacks at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee in 1951. Noteworthy is the fact that no Blacks were allowed to attend Florida's public law schools at that time. The law school at FAMU produced many notable black lawyers but was defunded by the Florida legislature in 1966. The last class at FAMU Law School graduated in 1968. Following the school's closure, a law school was created at Florida State University with equipment and books that once serviced FAMU's law school. As a result of Hawkins' actions, law schools at FAMU and FSU were established.
**Harley Herman**: Narrator and executive director of the Virgil Hawkins Historical Society Inc. has been working on the Virgil Hawkins story for the past three decades. He was instrumental in obtaining the posthumous admission of Virgil Hawkins to the Florida Bar after his death.

**Attorney George Allen**: The first Black American to graduate from The University of Florida in 1962 after being admitted in September 1960 to the University of Florida Law school.

**Dr. James Ammons**: Born in Polk County and past president of Florida A & M University.

**Attorney Warren Dawson**: He was one of the first Black American born in Polk County to become a Lawyer. He was born in Mulberry Florida. Past President of the Nation Bar Association.

**Attorney Daryl Parks**: He was born in Lake Hamilton, Polk County Florida, graduated from Florida State University Law School, A Past President of The National Bar Association, Partner at Parks and Crump Law Firm, Attorney for Trayvon Martin.

**Attorney Benjamin Crump**: Graduate of Florida State University Law School, current president of the National Bar Association, Partner at Parks and Crump Law Firm, Attorney for Trayvon Martin.

**Attorney Eugene Pettis**: Past President of the Florida Bar. The first Black President of the Florida Bar.

**Attorney Frank Scruggs**: Chair, Florida Supreme Court Racial and Ethnic Bias Study Commission, 1990 – 1991, Attorney with Berger Singerman Firm.
Programme

VIRGIL HAWKINS STORY/ HISTORY MAKERS

Musical Prelude

Opening

Prayer

National Anthem (Duet)

Quentin Darrington
Soloist
Broadway Actor and Tony Award Nominee

Derek Menchan
Concert Cellist

Part One:

Story Prelude

Narration

Intermission

Part Two

History Makers

Closing Remarks

Closing Prayer
When Quentin Darrington attended Lake Gibson Junior High School, he made two choices that would eventually change his life bringing him to where he is today. He became a member of the Esteem Team which was formed to help fight racism and promote understanding and acceptance. He felt that the team members should do anything they can do to make a change that will be better for their future. At the same time, he was huge into football, wrestling, and basketball. That all changed with a drama class he took in school prompting him to join a summer community arts ensemble where he performed as the lion in The Wiz.

His life was changed forever. He pursued his high school education in theatre at Harrison Arts Center while performing at Lakeland Community Theatre and Theatre Winter Haven. He thrived under the mentorship and tutelage of teacher and director, Paul Hughes, honing his acting skills in many productions. He was awarded a Ruth Eckerd Hall Youth Scholarship in the Performing Arts which offers talented young people financial assistance for furthering their arts education. Majoring in theatre at the University of South Florida, he also worked as a professional actor and performed for underprivileged and at-risk children. His passion for young people and his hometown was evident when for many years; Quentin came back to Polk County to perform the musical version of The Gift of the Magi for middle school students, collaboration between the Polk County School Board and Lakeland Community Theatre. Quentin insisted on going into the audience of 1100 students after each of four performances to answer student's questions. Since graduating from college, he has had an active professional theatrical career, performing at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, Ruth Eckerd Hall and with national and regional tours.
Derek Menchan is both an avid and versatile performer and music educator. A composer and arranger as well, Menchan is equally at home playing works of venerated “classical” composers as well as bebop jazz charts and avant garde and world musics.

Trained as a ‘cellist at the Manhattan School, Menchan received tutelage from top tier ‘cellists Laszlo Varga (former New York Philharmonic principal), Janos Starker (former Chicago Symphony principal and famed on 5 continents); Olga and Slava Rostropovich, and the Juilliard’s Harvey Shapiro. Menchan has been principal ‘cellist of several orchestras, including the New York Pro Arte Ensemble, and the Orlando Symphony, and is an active soloist and chamber musician who has performed throughout the U.S. and in Canada and Europe. His compositions in various musical genres have been premiered in various Houston venues: the Contemporary Art Museum, DiverseWorks Artspace, the Bayou Music Theater, and also at the Toledo Museum of Art. As a bassist, Menchan has led his own jazz trios and quartets, having featured iconic guitarist Ed Vitale, of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker fame. Menchan has also done studio work with Grammy Award-winning producers Mike Dean and Mike Moore, recently noted for their work with Kanye West, Jay Z, and Drake. Currently a professor of the humanities at Polk State College in Central Florida, Menchan has been hailed as an “Ubercellist” by Inside Houston Magazine, and “one engagement away from being the next crossover king.” He is currently endorsed by N.S. Design, leading makers in electric basses and ‘celli.
Hubert Grimes: Born in Bartow, Mr. Grimes is a retired circuit judge from Volusia County.

Timothy Coon: Mr. Coon, now retired is Polk County’s first African American Judge.

Eric Myers: The Hillsborough County Judge is from Haines City in Polk County, Florida.

Professor Reginald Mitchell: Professor Mitchell is currently an instructor in the Florida A&M University College of Law.

Joyce Jones: Mrs. Jones of Leesburg, Florida was the secretary of Attorney Virgil Hawkins.

Bettye Coney: Mrs. Coney is the niece of Attorney Virgil Hawkins.

Albert Bethune: Mr. Bethune is the 93 year old son of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, the oldest living relative of Bethune Cookman University’s founder.

George & Seretha Tinsley: The Tinsleys are Polk County entrepreneurs.

Otis Birdsong: Born in Winter Haven, Mr. Birdsong was the first NBA guard to sign a $1 million contract.

Ken Riley: Born in Bartow, Mr. Riley is a retired National Football League defensive back.

Don Gaffney: Mr. Gaffney is the first African American quarterback to play for the University of Florida.

Willie Jackson: Mr. Jackson is the first African American scholarship player at University of Florida.

Kenny Calhoun: Mr. Calhoun, a Bartow resident played defense for the University of Miami Hurricanes.

Larry Dubin: Mr. Dubin is a Professor of Law at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law.
George J. Siplin’s friends and family liked to say the Orlando man never met a stranger. From Central Florida to Hollywood, the film and video technician greeted people he never met before as if they were friends, said brother Larry Hardaway of Lakeland.

“What can I do for you, brother man?” Siplin always asked. And he meant it. “Everyone was a brother to him,” Hardaway said.

Siplin died in April 2005 at Orlando Regional Sand Lake Hospital, where he was being treated for a brain aneurysm, Hardaway said. He was 64.

Siplin was born in Orlando on November 20, 1940, to what Hardaway, a Polk County Lawyer and civil-rights activist, said is one of the oldest black families in Central Florida. Siplin attended Jones High School, where he played football, but left before graduating. He wanted something more.

Siplin had a few opportunities as a black man in the segregated South, so he borrowed money from an aunt, bought a car, and drove to Hollywood, where he found work doing everything he could on the back lots of major studios. He was a grip, carpenter, main stage hand, union organizer and everything between, Hardaway said.

Siplin worked constantly, Hardaway recalled. When Hardaway visited his brother in 1976, Siplin was working on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, Sanford and Son and The Wolfman jack Show, all at the same time. What did Siplin do in his spare time? “He worked,” Hardaway said. “He loved it. He was very good at it.”

Once, while he was walking with his brother at Walt Disney World’s MGM Studios, they ran into Ed McMahon, whom Siplin knew from his work on The Tonight Show. McMahon was happy to see him. “He gave George a big hug.” Hardaway said. “I got chill bumps, I couldn’t even say my name.”

Siplin returned to Orlando in 1987, after about 20 years in Hollywood.

In the early 1990s, Siplin organized Black Filmmakers of Central Florida, whose members included experienced video and television technicians.

Siplin also worked on he set of The Mickey Mouse Club, was an organizer for the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts of the United States and set up shows at the Orange County Convention Center.

During his 17 years in Orlando, Siplin became known for mentoring up-and coming stagehands, sometimes giving up positions so they could get opportunities, Hardaway said.
Judge Karla Forman Wright

Karla Foreman Wright was born in Wilmington, Delaware as the youngest daughter of Charles O. Foreman and Nancy H. Foreman. She was married for 41 years to her college sweetheart, the late Dr. Victor J. Wright. They had two sons, Jahi and Ameer Wright. She attended Spellman College and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania; a Masters Degree in Social Work from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1974; and a Juris Doctorate degree from Northwestern University School of Law, Chicago, Illinois in 1983.

She became a member of the Florida bar in 1984. Her legal career included private practice with the Law Office of Delano S. Stewart, Tampa, Florida; assistant county attorney Hillsboro County, Tampa, Florida; Assistant Public Defender, 10th Judicial Circuit; Assistant County Attorney, Polk County, Florida and Senior Attorney for the Florida Department of Transportation. She was a frequent lecturer on Eminent Domain matters throughout the county and served as Chairman of the Florida Bar Eminent Domain Section.

Karla Foreman Wright practiced law for 17 years before her historic appointment as the first African-American female judge in Polk County, Florida in 2000. She was reelected by general election in 2002 by an overwhelming margin.

In 2005 she became the first African-American Circuit Court judge in the 10th Judicial Circuit where she served for seven years until sending notice of her retirement in October 2012. Judge Wright established a reputation for fairness, compassion and civility. She cared about young people and often lectured on the role of the Courts and delinquency prevention.

Karla Foreman Wright was a community servant. She shared her time, talents and resources with many community boards, agencies and organizations including the NAACP, FAMU Alumni Association and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. She received many awards, honors and recognitions including the 2012 Gertrude Rush Award presented by the National Bar Association recognizing her pioneering spirit and commitment to civil rights and equality for all people.

Karla Wright has been a special person for Polk County. She has brought high standards of professionalism, intelligence, and compassion for her community. Our "Jump Off" which was created by her and her husband provides hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarship for the children of Polk County. The members of the Virgil Hawkins Bar Association will miss her as well as the Polk County community.
Harley Herman

Harley Herman is a Plant City attorney and the Executive Director of the Virgil Hawkins' Historical Society, Inc. He has worked for the almost three decades to restore and promote Virgil Darnell Hawkins' contribution to Florida Civil Right History. Herman's efforts began in 1988, after Hawkins died a disgraced and impoverished man, despite his decade-long court battle during the 1950's that desegregated Florida's public universities. Hawkins' fight not only cost him the right to attend the University he desegregated, but denied him access to a career in the legal profession until the final decade of his 82-year life.

Herman, a graduate of the University of Florida, began practicing law in 1976, the same year Virgil Hawkins was admitted to the Florida Bar. A twenty-three year-old white law student, supervised by law professors during his first year of practice, Herman obtained all of the training denied to Virgil Hawkins whose 1976 admission to the Florida Bar came at age seventy, with no assistance from the law school that denied his admission a quarter of a century earlier. "I never realized how valuable my law school education was", says Herman, "until I stood in the courtroom representing clients whose opponents were clients of Mr. Hawkins". "At times, it was like fighting an aging Muhammed Ali, knowing that if I had faced this man in his prime, I would have been no match for his zeal, his innate skills, and his passion for securing justice for those in need of his services."

When Herman and his wife were among a handful of whites at Hawkins' capacity-crowd funeral and he observed that no representatives of the State of Florida were in attendance, Herman concluded that without an effort to restore Hawkins' reputation, his legacy would be lost to history, all because he had unsuccessfully attempted to fulfill his dream of practicing law too late in life. Herman's efforts included the filing of a Petition to Posthumously Reinstall Mr. Hawkins membership in the Florida Bar, which was granted by the Florida Supreme Court ten months after Hawkins' 1988 death. In 1989, over the objections of the University of Florida, Herman drafted the Florida law that forced UF's College of Law to name its civil legal clinic after Virgil Hawkins, so that students receiving the education he was denied, could represent the clients Hawkins wanted to serve, in a law firm named for Mr. Hawkins. In 1991, Herman designed and raised funds for the monument to Mr. Hawkins in his home town of Okahumpka, Florida. He worked with PBS producer, Larry Dubin on the 1993 documentary about Mr. Hawkins entitled: "A Lawyer Made in Heaven". Herman is currently working with African-American students at the University of Florida to obtain approval of their proposal for an on-campus monument to Mr. Hawkins efforts to integrate the University. He continues to compile the history of Mr. Hawkins life and has published numerous articles about Mr. Hawkins life and contributions to Civil Rights history.
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The Virgil Hawkins Story

"Educator & Civil Rights Activist"

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