

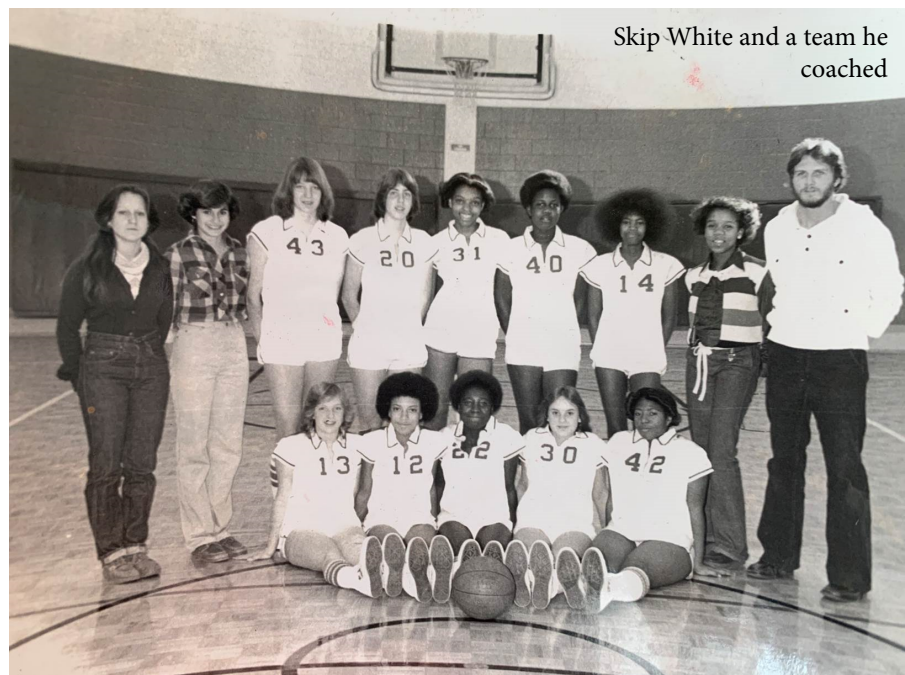
“My dad was like a bridge,” BJ Laughter said. I had just met BJ, as his dad had recently been admitted to the Elizabeth House. I asked BJ what we should know about his dad’s life, and what made him unique. BJ went on to explain that his dad, James “Jim” Laughter, was the first coach of an integrated sports team in the history of Henderson County. Not only that, he was instrumental in facilitating the process of integration in Henderson County schools. “We would get death threat calls,” BJ remembered. “My dad was like, ‘OK, I’ll meet you on the front lawn.’” Jim, later affectionately known as “Pop” by some students, did not back down. According to his son, Franklin, “Dad saw people as people.” BJ, who went on to be a coach himself, explained that there are three levels of coaching: fundamentals, psychology, and heart. “Dad had heart.” One of the students on Jim Laughter’s first integrated basketball team was Skip White. Skip was also served as a patient at the Elizabeth House in 2017. BJ Laughter recalled, “There was a white student who started on the team, and his last name was White!” Skip White was passionate about the team, and outspoken in his belief that all people should be treated as equals, regardless of race, class, creed, or skin color. According to his daughter, Meagan, Skip invited his teammates to Thanksgiving at his great-grandparents’ house one year, and when his family made it clear that the “students of color” on the team were not welcome, Skip took the whole group out to eat at a restaurant, forgoing Thanksgiving with his family in order to maintain solidarity with his teammates.

Some students who were against integration would try to stir up trouble in the locker room, according to BJ Laughter, “and Skip would put them in their place.” Skip went on to coach basketball himself, carrying on the values he learned as a student on Jim Laughter’s team, and the values he naturally carried inside himself as a good teammate and friend. When I approached Skip’s daughter Meagan about this story, Meagan called it a “full circle moment.” She said, “It feels good to know people remember my dad.” In my own experience, working for Four Seasons for the past 5 years, I can’t help but notice the links and connections between families and individual lives that make up our community, like the

White and Laughter families. Each life makes an impact; each life becomes intertwined with the lives of others. The purpose of this story does not end with Jim and Skip, although clearly, they both were instrumental in elevating the integrity, justice, and equality in Henderson County. Instead, it’s about the recognition that we can make our lives like “a bridge” as BJ said of his father. We can use our lives to open a path beyond the limitations of an obstacle.

It seemed too coincidental to me that I learned of this story during Black History Month. Although I was not able to contact any of the students of color on Jim’s first team, I hear of Jim’s and Skip’s contributions to our community, and hear their stories as an invitation to all of us to live our lives as bridges for each other, living in humility and committing to protecting the rights and wellbeing of those around us who have been oppressed. To me, this is one of the greatest expressions of love that we can offer each other.

Coach Jim Laughter



Skip White and a team he coached