

# High expectations in the audience of life

I met Ronald Bradley in the fall of 1957 when he started teaching at Newton County High School. He was also the new junior varsity football coach and the boy's varsity basketball coach. Coach Bradley was, and is, an imposing figure, and he used to do one-handed push-ups to demonstrate to our new freshman class that we had a long road to travel if we were to reach his level of conditioning.

A few days after we started at Newton High, a group of farm boys decided to pick up Coach Bradley's Hillman station wagon and place it on the sidewalk. Fortunately, he came along as the project was in its infancy, and even though he knew what we were doing, he said very little to us. His way of understanding how to take control of a situation was always uncanny, and even more inexplicable was the fact that we never understood how that worked.

I didn't play basketball for Ronald Bradley, but I did try football and, in spite of the fact that I wasn't very good at the sport, he made it seem like we were all destined for fame and adula-



Virgil Costley

tion. Bradley taught civics, a subject that modern educational institutions have declared unnecessary in this day. Small wonder that many high school graduates don't know that we have three branches of government and think the Constitution is a new line of clothing.

The freshman year of high school is a wondrous time of coming of age, and the average 14-year-old is so bewildered by the changes in his or her environment and roller coaster physical growth that the world of adults is completely ignored. By the 10th-grade, a certain level of sophistication is reached, and the world is quite different from the year before. It was into this urbane world that I found myself, a 10th-grade student

taking civics, a ninth-grade course.

My parents insisted that I take Latin in the ninth-grade, so the next year I had to catch up on civics, a required course. It was truly a heady experience to be a 15-year-old sophomore in a class with 14-year-olds, especially if half of them were girls and were interested in dating older men. Ronald Bradley made that course exciting and learning was fun. It probably didn't hurt any that a girl's gym class met at the same time, and we were treated to music every day. For a while, it seemed as if the Teddy Bears, a popular vocal group, announced the beginning of each class session.

The 1957-58 boy's basketball team at Newton High was good, but many of the kids hardly looked like superstars. Little did anyone know that these humble beginnings would eventually translate into a home game winning streak that stretched from 1959 to 1967. National recognition poured down on these sons of farmers, merchants and mill workers who seldom failed to perform beyond their abilities.

Ronald Bradley nurtured young athletes to recognize their natural physical gifts, and he even made superstars out of a few who were slightly deficient in that department. They went on to play college sports, become doctors and lawyers, and a couple to perish in accidents, but this story is not about the 129 consecutive home games they won or the state championship of 1964. It is about the inspiration of Ronald Bradley, who is now back at the helm of the Newton County boy's basketball program.

Bradley believes that every child can and should excel at something, and he prods, quarrels, rewards and guides students who want to exceed their expectations. He is an uncompromising relic whose basketball teams look like they are caught in a time warp. Discipline and commitment to the fundamentals of a task are core beliefs, and his athletes abide by strict rules and don't wear earrings. When they enter a gymnasium on game night, the boys wear matching navy blazers, button-down shirts, rep ties and black dress shoes. Most kids probably think these young

men look and act strange, but it is apparent that these players feel special. They demonstrate this by playing basketball better than almost everyone else plays.

These children of the new millennium are special — they are being taught courage, fairness, a sense of right and wrong and they are learning how to be responsible adults, not just good basketball players. Coach Bradley loves sports and he beams like a starry night when his labors produce good athletes, but he also bestows a stamp of approval and quiet praise on kids who don't wear letter jackets.

I AM an unabashed admirer of Ronald Bradley and have been since my high school days. Though I still like to brag to folks that I know a coaching legend, I'll never forget my surprise when I walked out on stage to present my high school senior piano recital. There he sat, and when I finished, he applauded and smiled his trademark grin with as much enthusiasm as if I had just hit the winning two points in a close game. Maybe he didn't even like good music (he probably did-

n't hear much that night anyhow), but he believes in recognizing the efforts kids make in a crazy world.

Coach Bradley came back to Newton County High School this year to begin what is hoped will be the extension of the glory years, and people will talk about him in tones of adoration for his successes at basketball. It is my sincere hope that the parents of those other kids who are not athletes will appreciate the things their children learn from this man who believes in old-fashioned ideas and convinces others to believe also.

Expectations for Ronald Bradley are high in Newton County, but it is comforting that his expectations of us are just as high, and he will do everything within his abilities to make us feel special. It is even possible that another young person will look out in the audience of life and be surprised.

*Virgil Costley, former Newton County Juvenile Court judge, practices family law in Conyers. His phone number is 770-761-7700.*