

Hidden truth

Film explores legacy of Hendersonville's all-Black Ninth Avenue School

BY JUSTIN McGUIRE

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When **Edward King** walked into his first integrated classroom in 1965, the white students assumed he and his Black classmates would struggle to keep up.

But King, who was entering the eighth grade that fall, already had been tackling college-level math and science at all-Black Ninth Avenue School and found the newly rechristened Hendersonville Junior High to be less academically challenging than what he was used to.

"They thought they were going to have to dumb it down for us," recalls King, who lives in Hendersonville. "Truth is, we thought the material was weak."

That "hidden truth," as King calls it, is at the heart of *Color Beyond the*

Lines, a documentary premiering on Saturday, June 21, in Hendersonville. The film, directed by **David Weintraub**, explores the history of Ninth Avenue School and its lasting impact on Black students in Henderson, Transylvania and Polk counties from 1951-65.

LIFE LESSONS

For King, the documentary tells a necessary and overlooked story: Students at Ninth Avenue were often better prepared than their white peers.

"Our teachers were rough because they had to make up for what we didn't have in materials," he says.

Students were handed worn-out textbooks discarded from white schools, often falling apart and held together with glue and tape. But educators overcame such obstacles and pushed



ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: Students at Hendersonville's Ninth Avenue School work on the school yearbook in this photo from the 1960s. Photo courtesy of Center for Cultural Preservation

students with advanced textbooks, hands-on labs and rigorous instruction.

"We learned how to use the slide rule when we were in the fourth grade," King says. "Some of the English textbooks we used in third or fourth grade weren't used in white schools until high school."

When King returned to Ninth Avenue, rebranded as Hendersonville Junior High (and now known as Hendersonville Middle School) for eighth grade, the building was integrated, but attitudes had not changed much.

"Yes, there was some bullying," King recalls. "The teachers looked down on us. We went from being nurtured to being dismissed."

Even guidance counselors discouraged students like King from attending college. But he persevered, earning a psychology degree from UNC Asheville and accumulating numerous professional certifications over a long career. Many of his classmates went on to become educators, executives and professionals across the country.

King believes the documentary is a chance to correct the record and to inspire. "If we had been treated equally, if we had the same funding, what would Hendersonville be like now?" he asks. "It's not just about the past. It's about the opportunity that was lost for an entire community."

King will attend the documentary's premiere, eager to see not just how his story was told but how the broader story of Ninth Avenue will finally be seen.

BLACK VOICES

While the 60th anniversary of school desegregation in the Henderson, Polk and Transylvania counties served as a

catalyst for the film, it covers a broader history of Black education and community life from the 1870s to the present, says Weintraub, who began his filmmaking career in 1999 after stints as a civil rights attorney and environmental activist.

Color Beyond the Lines may be his last feature, he says. Having directed more than 50 films, many of them aired on public television, he is ready to focus on writing and mentoring younger filmmakers.

"This was a film I knew I had to make," explains Weintraub, executive director of the Center for Cultural Preservation. "There are so many myths about Black history in this region, like there was no slavery here or no real discrimination, and I wanted to challenge those myths with the truth, told directly by the people who lived it."

In partnership with the Henderson County Black History Research Group, revived in recent years and led by community storyteller **Ronnie Pepper**, Weintraub conducted more than two dozen interviews, mostly with Black elders like King.

"I wanted this to be their story, not mine," Weintraub says. "Too often, white storytellers shape Black narratives to fit a comfortable mold. My job was to step back and let these voices be heard."

Weintraub also drew on resources like **Betty Jamerson Reed's** book *School Segregation in Western North Carolina* and longtime Henderson County historian **Jennifer "Jennie" Jones Giles**.

The Ninth Avenue School was a "union school" that operated from 1951-65. Union schools, a common model during segregation, provided education from first through 12th grades under

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one roof. Ninth Avenue became the educational cornerstone of the Black community, absorbing students from a network of smaller schools that closed down, including Edneyville Colored School, East Flat Rock Colored School and Brickton Colored School in Fletcher.

Ninth Avenue's physical structure was modest, just two floors, each with a single large room divided into subject corners. Resources were scarce. Textbooks arrived battered and outdated, often handed down through multiple white schools first.

Pepper, who was key to finding former students for Weintraub to interview, attended the Ninth Avenue School from first through third grades before transferring to Rosa Edwards School (in the Fourth Avenue building that now serves as the central office for Henderson County Public Schools). What stood out most about Pepper's early education wasn't just the academics, but the larger lessons taught by Black educators who understood the challenges their students would face.

"They were also teaching you life skills so that we could maneuver and be proud of who we were," Pepper explains.

SHARING STORIES

Pepper was interviewed for the film, but his focus was encouraging others to share their stories. "These are people that I've known most of my life and were willing [to talk]," he says. "I know my story and I don't think my story's important, but David always said, 'No, we got to get your story.'"

Pepper would have liked to include more stories from students from Transylvania and Polk counties who had to take long bus rides to and from Hendersonville, all the while passing all-white schools closer to home.

One such person was a former student who lived in Brevard and, at age 16, served as a bus driver transporting students to Ninth Avenue School. The

student later moved to California and opened a pharmaceutical company. "He told me, 'Ron, there's times now I'll wake up and I'll think about when I was 16 and all the responsibility I had to drive that bus and those individuals that were older than me,'" Pepper recalls.

But the former bus driver died before the documentary was started. Similarly, Pepper points out, most of the teachers from Ninth Avenue are now gone.

"Me and David realized how important it was to go ahead and try to get as many interviews done as possible because people are aging out, and they are passing away," he says.

One moment of pride and complexity captured in the film is the 1972 state basketball championship, won by Hendersonville High just a few years after desegregation.

"Sports played a real role in showing people the value of integration," Weintraub explains. "I interviewed four players from that team, and they didn't think they were making history — but they were."

The film acknowledges the bittersweet nature of such progress. Integration, while a major step forward, often came at the expense of Black-led institutions. The Ninth Avenue School was shut down in 1965, its students scattered across formerly all-white schools.

"The Black communities throughout Western North Carolina had thriving cultural legacies that were severely impacted by discrimination ... and then decimated by efforts to 'integrate,' which further obliterated their precious institutions," Weintraub says. "What I hope that people will take from this film is that the Black community was rich in many ways that count even if they never had much money to speak of."

The premiere of Color Beyond the Lines will be at 7 p.m. Saturday, June 21, in the Thomas Auditorium at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock. To get tickets, go to avl.mx/eus. X



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