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### **WHAT A LONG STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN**

When you are struggling through something difficult and painful you often don't have the time or possess the necessary perspective to appreciate how monumental it might be. When you are in the heat of a battle you don't have time to think about how history will record the unfolding events. When Martin Luther King Jr. was working to secure the rights of African Americans in the late 1950s and 1960s, he was feared and reviled by those who felt he threatened the status quo that was built on white supremacy. However, he was also seen by many others as an eloquent and righteous leader who was fighting for the equal treatment that had been denied to African Americans for more than three centuries. It was only after his murder that the magnitude of his life and work was fully realized, and he became an American icon.

When the Black Stuntmen's Association was formed and they began fighting through the prejudice and roadblocks put in front of them by the white stunt groups and the Hollywood establishment in the 1960s, they weren't thinking about how history might look upon them. Their mission was to stop the insidious practice of painting down white stuntmen, and to secure jobs, both for themselves and other minorities and women seeking to break into the very tough and

unforgiving world of Hollywood film and television productions. They weren't thinking that they were breaking down a door that others would pass through much more easily than they did. They weren't thinking that they were making history, but that is exactly what they were doing.

Some BSA members, including Henry Kingi, William Upton, Tony Brubaker, Richard Washington, and Alex Brown, began working regularly in the 1970s and kept on doing stunts in hundreds of Hollywood's biggest productions well into the twenty-first century, including *Glory*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Scarface*, *Batman Returns*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Armageddon*, *Fast & Furious*, and many, many more. Their work has also included acting roles and advancing to become stunt coordinators and assistant directors. In addition, Kingi has three sons who have built careers as some of the top stuntmen in Hollywood.

As more and more black stuntmen and stuntwomen began working regularly and encountering less discrimination, the practice of the paint-down became exceedingly rare. As the spokesman for the BSA, Willie had fewer battles to fight as the 1980s rolled into the 1990s. His stunt buddies had established themselves and many others had followed and were now enjoying lucrative—albeit very dangerous—careers. The fact that the studios no longer had to brace themselves for a protest or a challenge from the BSA when discrimination had been exposed was a good thing. It meant that the old boys' network of white stuntmen that kept jobs from going to anyone outside the cabal of white males was broken, and the opportunity to work in Hollywood productions had been opened up to men and women of many different backgrounds. This didn't mean that Willie and his mates were not still vigilant. They would occasionally hear about a situation where blacks were being denied the chance to work, where a production may have a few dozen

stuntmen working and all of them would be white, and Willie would make a call to protest. However, this happened much less frequently as the twentieth century drew to a close. The BSA became much less active and became a legacy organization, something special that had happened in the past, and it had served its purpose extremely well.

In the early 2000s Willie started thinking about all they had accomplished, and he didn't want their work to be forgotten. Their legacy needed to be inscribed in the history of the American civil rights movement. He started talking to his fellow BSA members about his plan to resurrect the organization and help it receive proper recognition, and the BSA members named him President of the Black Stuntmen's Association in 2004. Willie organized the first BSA reunion and it was held in Las Vegas in 2008. Most of the original members, many of whom were now in their 60s and retired from stunt work, attended the event, but Eddie Smith, the man who started it all, had died in 2005 at the age of 81.

The first big award the group received was the NAACP Image Award - President's Award, an honor that is given to one recipient each year, and other honorees have included Muhammad Ali, Colin Powell, Spike Lee, Rihanna, Venus and Serena Williams, and LeBron James. It is given in recognition of special achievement and distinguished public service and was bestowed upon the BSA at the 43rd NAACP Image Awards ceremony in February 2012. Fittingly, the original BSA members were presented the award by Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte, two of the prominent actors who helped them gain their footing in Hollywood when they were first starting out.

"Harry (Belafonte) and Sidney (Poitier) bent over backwards to do everything that they could to make sure that we were there in the first place," Brubaker said.



Growing up in the cotton fields of Mississippi in the 1950s, Willie could not wait to get out of there and go somewhere—anywhere but Mississippi. He had seen too much and felt the sting of racism and segregation too intensely. He had watched his mom work too hard for too long and have nothing to show for it. He never liked working in the fields or the life of a country boy. Many people enjoy being out in the sun, smelling the sweet scent of everything growing anew each spring, and watching the birds soar through the sky. Willie liked all that, too; he just wasn't interested in doing it from sunup to sundown, bent over picking cotton with his aching fingers and a sack filled with 50-100 pounds of the cash crop on his back. What he really didn't like was what being a black sharecropper in Mississippi represented—a second-class, or perhaps third- or fourth-class, citizen. Considered a lesser being. Going to a rundown and underfunded school while the white kids enjoyed the best the town could afford. Don't even think about going into that nice restaurant. Don't use the clean public bathroom—you can go in the meadow like a feral dog. He couldn't take it, so he left, and he returned only occasionally to visit his mom, his childhood friends, and attend reunions of his high school class and the Howard Bottom community. It was still home, however. This place had formed him and put the gravel in his gut and the fire in his eye. If he had grown up in a comfortable middle-class suburb, he couldn't have fought as hard and as long as he had for the Black Stuntmen's Association. The fields of Mississippi created the kid who was boiling with rage at the injustice all around him.

So when Bryant Clark, an attorney and member of the Mississippi House of Representatives from the town of Pickens in Holmes County, told Willie in 2015 that he had arranged for the Black

Stuntmen's Association to be honored for their heroic contributions at the Mississippi state capitol in Jackson, he was moved beyond words. Willie had never been to the state capitol. Now he was going to be honored there. Oh, if only his mama could see him now. All the memories of the fields and segregation and the family history he was told came flooding back.

“Black people pass down things. And I found this out from my mom. My mom didn't have a birth certificate. The old people back in those days would write your birthdate in the Bible. It was the midwife who delivered us, 'cause we didn't go to no hospital. I was born at home, and my mom was telling me about her grandmother. Her grandmother came over from Africa on a ship. My mom was born in 1900. My mom's mom was born in 1875, and I think that her grandmother was born in the 1830s or 1840s, but she came on a ship. I remember my mom tellin' me about her granny, and great-grandmama was tellin' them about the people dying, how they slept, and how they was chained together on these ships and when they died, they would throw them overboard, and how the women got raped on these ships and stuff. And you know, I got slave records of my great-great grandfather I researched. And that when he was brought to America, he was brought to Anderson County in South Carolina. And that was on my mom's mother's side. On my mom's dad's side he was brought to Virginia,” Willie said.

Willie headed home to Mississippi in early March for the ceremony at the state capitol, and he was not alone. He was accompanied by BSA members Alex Brown, Henry Kingi, Joe Tilque, William Upton, and Henry Graddy, who was also a Mississippi native. More than 40 years after they started fighting together, the BSA members always supported each other. These are people you can count on. Dewitt Fondren, another BSA member

from Mississippi, had planned to attend, but he became ill and couldn't make it.

Willie leaned on his cane as he walked up the long granite promenade to the massive state capitol, an impressive building which is more than 400 feet wide. The capitol bears some resemblance to the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC. It is elongated and constructed of grey stone with spacious chambers on the left and right sides, and it is also topped by an iconic dome in the center. A 15-foot wide and 2,800-pound solid brass eagle—the symbol of American freedom—sits perched atop the dome, soaring 180 feet above the soil. The building and the eagle face south. Always south. Built in 1903, the capitol features lush artwork depicting scenes from Mississippi's history. Those responsible for the building seem not to grasp the irony of displaying a replica of The Liberty Bell alongside a statue honoring the women of the Confederacy.

When Willie and the others walked into the capitol, they were brought to a small conference room where they would wait to be called into the chamber to receive their honor. When he stepped through the door, he stopped for a moment when he saw who was sitting in the room waiting for him. It was Robert G. Clark, Jr., the father of Bryant Clark. The elder Clark was a legend in Mississippi, especially to black folks, and especially to those from Holmes County. He was born in 1928 in his family's home in Pickens, a tiny town out in the country, 25 miles south of Lexington. The home was built by his father in the early twentieth century, and it sits on a former plantation where Clark's great grandparents had toiled as slaves. Upon emancipation, the plantation owner sold the land to Clark's great grandfather. As was the case for blacks all over the South for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, being a landowner—as opposed to a sharecropper or tenant farmer—gave the Clarks something of an advantage over most of their black

brothers and sisters. It gave them a certain independence. Landowning blacks could do things, and sometimes say things, without fear of being thrown out of their homes. One of Robert's grandfathers who helped raise him was born in the early 1850s and had been a slave for the first 11 years of his life. He told Robert that things were going to get better in America for blacks, but they were only going to get better if young people like him grew up and did something to make it better. He carried that mission with him for the rest of his life. Robert worked his way through Jackson State University, earning a bachelor's degree, and then he received a master's degree in Administration and Educational Services from Michigan State University before coming back home to Pickens in the 1950s to manage the family homestead, as his father has asked him to. He became a teacher and basketball coach at Louise High School. He knew Willie from his coaching days, as he had coached against him.

Clark became involved in the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, working to register blacks to vote, the kind of activity that was often too risky for blacks who did not own their own land. His involvement in politics progressed, and in 1967 he ran for office, hoping to represent Holmes County in the Mississippi legislature. He ran on the ticket of the Freedom Democratic Party, a party that had been formed in 1964 to combat the Mississippi wing of the national Democratic Party, the party that had been responsible for disenfranchising blacks in the state for so many decades. The Mississippi legislature is composed of 177 elected officials, and between 1894 and 1967 not one black person served in the legislature. Clark sought to change that. Three-quarters of the people who lived in Holmes County were black, and that had been the case throughout the twentieth century. Yet, due to their disenfranchisement, neither they nor any other black person in

Mississippi had an elected representative who looked like them for more than 70 years. Bolstered by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, as well as the work done by countless activists in Mississippi and across the country, Clark won the seat to represent Holmes County. He would remain the only black representative in the legislature for almost a decade, and in 1977 he became the first black committee chairman in Mississippi's history, when he was named to head the Education Committee. He would go on to serve in the legislature for 35 years until his retirement in 2003, and the following year he became the first black person in the history of Mississippi to have a state office building named after him.

Willie knew all this, and it is why he was so moved that Robert Clark was there. He was 86 years old, yet he still radiated the same dignity and determination that made him so beloved and successful.

"Mr. Clark, I didn't know you were coming," Willie said.

"Oh, I wasn't going to miss this, Willie. It is not every day that the state of Mississippi honors black people for being civil rights heroes—especially those who gave me nightmares when I was coaching against them 60 years ago," Clark said.

Willie laughed and sat down next to Clark.

"Willie, when I was elected representative for Holmes County and came here in 1968, I had no idea what it would be like, but I knew it wouldn't be easy. I won the election, and my opponent challenged the results in court. I didn't know until 15 minutes before I was sworn in if I would even be seated in the legislature. They would do anything to keep me out of here. You look around this building, you see all the beautiful statues and the ornate woodwork and the grand chambers and domes. You know, when I started serving as a representative, black people weren't even allowed in this building. The only ones allowed in were those that were cleaning the toilets and polishing the brass," Clark said.



“This is the first time I have ever been in here,” Willie said.

“Exactly,” Clark continued, “they didn’t build this place for people like us. When I became a representative, no one would sit next to me for the first eight years. No one would talk to me. When I wanted to address the chamber, I would stand up and raise my hand, and the gentleman who was presiding would call on someone who had stood up after me—every time. I thought about quitting a few times because it was so hard to get anything done, but I couldn’t do it. I had to keep going. Being one black among 121 whites did not intimidate me at all. Because I knew what I knew, and the one thing I knew I was going to zero in on was what I was an expert in, and that was education. I knew no one there knew as much about education as I did. And eventually, it paid off. When you want to change things, it is a marathon, and not a sprint, unfortunately.”

“Oh, I know that,” Willie said.

After they were ushered into the chamber for the reading of the proclamation honoring the Black Stuntmen’s Association, Willie and the other BSA members received a standing ovation. Willie spoke on behalf of the group to thank the state of Mississippi for this honor, and as he walked up to the podium, his mind started to wander into the darkness that is Mississippi’s history.

“When I was up there speaking, I was thinking about all the trees I saw on the capitol grounds. I know blacks been hung in Jackson, but I just didn’t see it because we lived out in the country. But this plays on your mind. Now I’m standing in this podium speaking, looking out where all the senators and the congress people sit, and thinking: what have some of them done?”

He kept those incendiary musings in his head and was gracious when he spoke.

“On behalf of the Black Stuntmen’s Association and the Coalition of Black Stuntmen and Stuntwomen, I would like to thank the

legislature for this tremendous honor. I want to especially thank Representative Bryant Clark for putting this all together. Your dad was a pretty good basketball coach, but he was a great statesman, and he is someone I always looked up to.”

Willie paused and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I stand here before you amazed that this is even happening, that we are receiving this honor from you. I ain’t never been to the state capitol, and none of my friends have neither. It was just not a place where we felt welcome. So thank you for making me feel welcome. I spent the first twenty years of my life up in Holmes County, picking cotton on Clifton Plantation, living in a segregated society, and getting chased around by Sheriff Dick Byrd. It was a hard life, and to honest, I couldn’t wait to get out of Mississippi because there were no good prospects for a young black man in Mississippi at that time. On top of that, my mom, my dear sweet mom who has since passed, she was worried about me. I wasn’t the kind of person who took very well to bein’ pushed around, and she figured that sooner or later I would do something or be in a situation where I would get myself thrown in jail for no good reason, or maybe even killed. So I left. I went to serve my country in the Air Force for four and a half years, and my last assignment was the Los Angeles Air Force Base, and right after I got out of the service I met Cal Brown, the first black stuntman in Hollywood. I knew when I started working with these guys that we were doing something important. The old boys’ network of Hollywood stuntmen was painting down white stuntmen with makeup to double black actors. We said no, no, no. That ain’t right. We’re here. We’ve been trained. We’re qualified. Hire us. We faced all kinds of racism: you ain’t good enough, you ain’t smart enough, you ain’t tough enough.”

Willie stopped to take a drink of water.

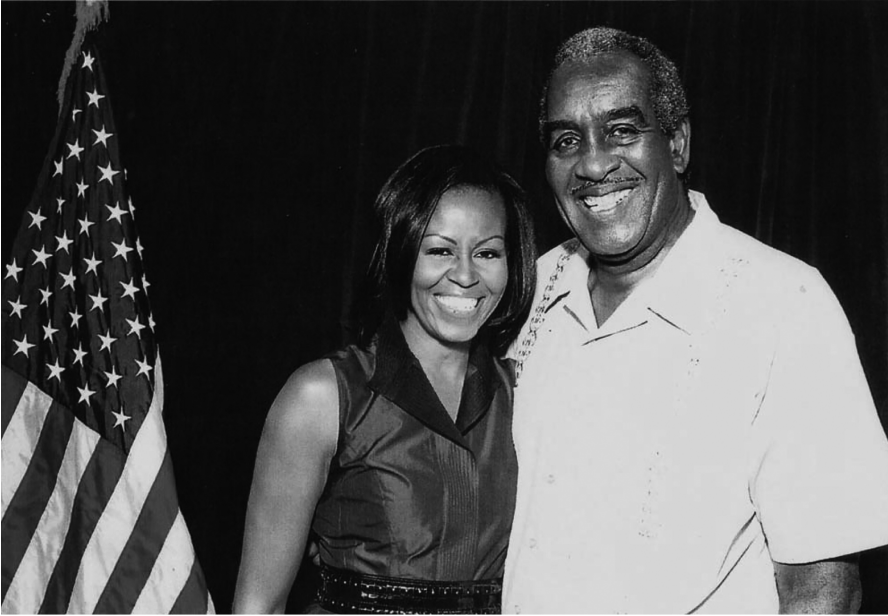
“It was very dangerous work, and at first, almost none of the white stunt guys would help us. Just the opposite. They worked against us. Back in the late 60s, early 70s, when a black stuntman went to work, one of three things could happen: he could come home, he could go to the hospital, or go to the graveyard. We would get paid sometimes half the money for the same stunt on the same day that a white guy did. But we kept pushing, and we never gave up. And eventually, we made it. Some of our members became some of the top stuntmen in the business, but nothing came easy, and nothing was handed to us. We had to work twice as hard and be twice as good to be accepted, but then things started to get better in the late 70s and 80s. What’s more, our fight not only opened doors for black stuntmen and stuntwomen, but for black people and other minorities all over Hollywood.”

Just before Willie spoke, the Mississippi House Concurrent Resolution 83 was proclaimed in the state capitol. An excerpt from the resolution states that “Whereas, it is the policy of this Legislature to applaud organizations that seek to tear down barriers and build bridges for all citizens of this country. Now, therefore, be it resolved by the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi, the Senate concurring therein, that we do honor the many contributions of the historic founding and existence of the Black Stuntmen's Association and the Coalition of Black Stuntmen and Stuntwomen.”



Willie never missed an opportunity to educate people about what the BSA had accomplished. He had become friendly with Beau Biden after meeting him at an event, and in 2012 the Democratic Party in Las Vegas called him to tell him that Biden requested he be invited to an upcoming event in Las Vegas where First Lady Michelle Obama would be in attendance. He happily accepted and when he

met the First Lady he told her all about the Black Stuntmen's Association, as she had never heard of the organization.



*Michelle Obama and Willie Harris, 2012*

The BSA had also been honored in 2010 by the state of California and the United States Congress. On February 25, 2010, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada introduced a concurrent resolution of both houses of Congress, stating “I rise today to acknowledge a group that has created opportunities for countless African American men and women in the film and television industry. I rise to submit this Senate Concurrent Resolution honoring the Black Stuntmen's Association and the Coalition of Black Stuntmen and Women for their efforts to not only integrate but enhance the television and film industry.

Later that year Willie attended a speaking event at a library near his home in Las Vegas. The speaker was Antonio Vargas, best known for playing Huggy Bear, the slick-talking and flashily dressed police informant in the 1970s television series *Starsky and Hutch*. Fargas

and Willie were friendly, so at the end of his talk, Fargas called Willie up to speak to the group about the Black Stuntmen's Association. As the audience was filing out, a man came up to Willie and started chatting with him about what Willie had just told them about the BSA. It was Merald "Bubba" Knight, a singer, songwriter, record producer, and the older brother of Gladys Knight. Bubba was one of the Pips. Willie and Bubba exchanged phone numbers and vowed to stay in touch.

Willie's phone rang about six months later.

"Hello," Willie said.

"Hey, Willie, do you remember me?" the caller asked.

"Who is this?" Willie asked.

"It's Bubba Knight. We met at the library."

"Hey, Bubba. How you doin', man?"

"Good. Good. Listen, Willie, I've been talking to a woman who is working on building a museum at the Smithsonian in Washington about African Americans. Anyway, I was talking to her, and telling her about what you told me about the Black Stuntmen's Association, and she wants to talk to you."

"Why does she want to talk to me?"

"Because she thinks y'all are history makers and she wants to talk about maybe putting your group in the museum. Can I give her your phone number?" Bubba asked.

"Absolutely," Willie said.

This was interesting. A national museum to recognize and honor African Americans in Washington, DC., part of the Smithsonian. Wow. Willie had not heard about this as of 2010, though the idea for a building to honor the achievements of African Americans had been kicked around in the nation's capital for almost a century. However, like so many other things related to the progression of African Americans in the United States, it took a painfully long time to reach

fruition, hampered and impeded every step of the way by those who sought to keep blacks down. The first U.S. president to endorse the idea was Herbert Hoover in 1929. Throughout the twentieth century the notion had been raised and defeated many times for many different reasons, and in the late 1980s legislation was again introduced by members of Congress John Lewis of Georgia and Mickey Leland of Texas. That bill was killed, allegedly because members of Congress thought it was too expensive. The Smithsonian Institution drafted legislation which would establish the museum in the early 1990s and presented it to Congress. Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, a man widely considered to be racist and someone who had fought to keep Congress from creating a national holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr., prevented the bill from being considered on the Senate floor, and the effort stalled again. It wasn't until 2003 when bipartisan support in Congress finally coalesced and the Senate, House of Representatives, and President George W. Bush all agreed that this is something that needed to be done, and they passed the National Museum of African American History and Culture Act. The new law established the museum and provided funds for planning and site selection. The planning committee recommended that the museum be placed on the national mall, just northeast of the Washington Monument. Again, there was controversy, as some thought this site was too prominent for the museum. Eventually, however, the site was approved and work on planning the architecture and collections that would be housed in the museum began.

One of the people charged with building the collections was Dr. Dwandalyn Reece, the museum's Curator of Music and Performing Arts. She is the person who Bubba Knight talked to about the BSA, and she knew Bubba because Gladys Knight and the Pips would be recognized in the museum. She called Willie and told him she was

coming to Las Vegas and wanted to meet with as many BSA members as possible and hear their stories. Willie sprang into action. He contacted the pioneering black stunt performers who lived in Las Vegas, including Doug Lawrence, Evelyn Cuffee, and Jophery Brown and told them he was setting up a meeting with someone from the Smithsonian to talk about the BSA. He rallied the guys from California to come, including Alex Brown and Henry Kingi. In all, about a dozen of them came together to meet with Dr. Reece. Willie knew Shelley Berkley, the member of Congress who represented Las Vegas, and she agreed to let them meet in her conference room.

Dr. Reece knew right away that this was something special, and she was struck by Willie, whom she found to be “kind, lovable, and fiercely committed. I mean he had a story to tell, and he had a certain openness and willingness to share and to build a sense of community.”

She spoke to the group about the possibility of having them recognized in the museum, and she interviewed them individually, recording their recollections. After that first meeting, she was hooked.

“I instantly knew it had to be (included in the collection). I think as I talked to people, I said this is fascinating. What people did, what they knew, what they learned, the multiple roles that they played. I think particularly getting beyond the profession as just being a stuntman or stuntwoman, but for its social justice, its civil rights framing of what they were doing, that this was a group that was not just a professional association but was its own kind of civil rights association. They were professionals and proud of their work, but they were also intently trying to create space and value for African Americans in the industry. I think some of those issues that came up, I think it was Willie who told me, you know, we talk about the

stuntmen, but opening up opportunities for the food service people, and other entities those doors were not cracked open for. So it was very much a political effort, as much as it was an industry story, and that's what really took me," Reece said.

Dr. Reece came back to Las Vegas to meet with the BSA members a second time, to hear more of their stories, and to collect items to be donated to the museum, including a cherished jacket that William Upton received for his work on the film *Glory*.

The journey of the Black Stuntmen's Association fit perfectly with Dr. Reece's charge to help tell the story of the African American experience in the entertainment industry—the entire story, which encompasses all kinds of people who made important contributions.

"They become part of the national collection and the national story of the African American experience, and to me that says a lot, whether I was a curator or not. And I think what I appreciate about our museum is, it is not merely a hall of fame. We are looking at stories of real people from all walks of life and experiences. That's the national story. So the Black Stuntmen's Association, and the women too, I always have to make sure they are included, they're part of that story, very much part of that story, and we also make a point of saying that we tell the stories and elevate the voices that have yet to be heard. And that's from a variety of levels from the everyday people who contribute their experiences, but for me through the field it's the stories that are not written about in the newspapers or publicly covered in television or media, or even in the history books. It's just as important for me to create a complete picture of what entertainment was all about, and what drove it, and what opened these doors for all these people who relish in the riches and the wealth and the fame, of where they came from, and Black Stuntmen's Association is part of that story, and part of that foundation," Reece said.



The inclusion of the BSA's story in the museum's collection was also the pinnacle of Willie's effort to get their story heard.

"In the late 1960s, there was one black movie producer that we knew of—Gordon Parks. There were no black people in wardrobe or makeup or operating cameras. I don't like for it to come off as bragging. Young people will just say, 'Aw, you're full of it.' But we changed Hollywood. We busted down the doors for a lot of black people in the movie industry. You can go out here today and ask, 'Who is the BSA?' Ninety-nine percent of the population do not know. We accomplished a hell of a lot because we fought back, and I don't think that the studios will ever forget what we did, and I think it's time for the public and the world to know who we are, and what we did," Willie said.

Dr. Reece was certainly glad that Bubba Knight had told her about the BSA and that she was able to get to know Willie.

"I enjoyed working with him, his commitment, his passion, his honesty. I felt like he had been carrying, not a weight, in a bad way, but this tremendous story that he wanted people to know and looking for outlets to get it told and to understand what people had to go through, and what some men and women learned through their experiences. Not only to set the record straight, but to inspire and educate other people, and I was proud to play some part in that. I think with their donations it will be part of the museum forever. So that story is recognized and included on a larger level, and I have been happy to do that and do what I can within my own human and staff and museum resources," Reece said.

So back in 2010 the members of the BSA knew they were going to be recognized in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, but then came the wait. Construction began on the museum in 2012 and it was ready to open in the fall of 2016, shortly before President Barack Obama completed his second

term. Most of the BSA members were now in their seventies and several died between 2010 and the museum's opening. Of the approximately 30 original BSA members, a little more than half were still alive in 2016, and most of them traveled to Washington, DC with their families to witness the historic opening weekend. Some could not afford to make the trip, so Willie secured corporate funding to ensure everyone who was physically able could be there. Marge Kreeger, the attorney from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission who had helped the BSA fight the studios almost 40 years earlier, also joined them.

Willie was one of the fortunate ones who was able to get a ticket for the opening ceremony in front of the museum. He sat in a folding chair that was two sizes too small for him, while thousands more watched from across the street, standing and sitting on the matted turf of the National Mall at the base of the Washington Monument. Like the nearly two million people who attended President Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009—when the temperature was in the twenties—these people had to be there. They could not miss this moment. Willie marveled as speaker after speaker spoke of the need for this museum, and how long it had taken to come to fruition. They included John Lewis, former President George W. Bush, and Oprah Winfrey. Stevie Wonder gave an impassioned speech about the need for all Americans to come together and put away their hate. Patti Labelle received a standing ovation after singing “A Change is Gonna Come,” 52 years after Sam Cooke first sang the song. Everything was building up to the moment when President Barack Obama would address the crowd, and Willie was tingling as he watched Obama walk across the stage and stand at the podium. It was otherworldly when he started to speak in his deliberately halting style, as he is someone who knows that the empty spaces matter. At times, Willie felt like Obama was talking to him.

“Too often we ignored, or forgot, the stories of millions upon millions of others who built this nation just as surely, whose humble eloquence, whose calloused hands, whose steady drive helped to create cities, erect industries, build the arsenals of democracy. So this national museum helps to tell a richer and fuller story of who we are. It helps us better understand the lives, yes of the president, but also the slave, the industrialist, but also the porter, the keeper of the status quo, but also the activist seeking to overthrow that status quo,” Obama said.

Willie thought about his mom, bent over in the field, already looking like an old woman when she was in her 40s, a lifetime of sweat and toil behind her, yet so much more still ahead of her. He thought about how she would be positively glowing if she could be here. He also thought about all the men who had held sway over him before he became a grown-ass man—Oscar Harris, Peyton Abbott Jones, Sheriff Dick Byrd, Major Carson. They had power, and they wielded it to suit their own interests, not the interests of every person they were responsible for. They weren't trying to make things better. Most of them thought things were just fine the way they were. Obama was clearly different. He understood history. He understood that people have suffered. And he understood that things would only get better if people's eyes were opened, and we all worked together to see the injustices of the past and build a better future.

“The best history helps us recognize the mistakes that we've made, and the dark corners of the human spirit that we need to guard against. And yes, a clear-eyed view of history can make us uncomfortable. It'll shake us out of familiar narratives. But it is precisely because of that discomfort that we learn, and grow, and harness our collective power to make this nation more perfect. That's the American story that this museum tells, one of suffering and delight, one of fear, but also of hope, of wandering in the wilderness,

and then seeing, out on the horizon, a glimmer of the Promised Land,” Obama said.

At the museum’s opening, the BSA’s memorabilia was included in the Black Hollywood display, and the BSA items included the saddle used by Ernie Robinson, the association’s co-founder and first president, a United Stuntwomen’s Association jacket worn by Jadie David, and a BSA hat worn by Willie Harris. The memorabilia are displayed next to items and information honoring pioneering director Gordon Parks, Sidney Poitier, Whoopi Goldberg, Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and many more.

After working on building the museum’s collection for six years, Dr. Reece was able to see the impact that the museum had on the people whose achievements are recognized inside its walls, as well as all those who entered as visitors.

“What struck me as I sat out there and listened to remarks was how significant and important this was to people. I don’t want to say I underestimated, but when you’re really involved in all the doing, you kind of forget how symbolic, how emotional, I think when people come to the museum it’s a pilgrimage, and I’m humbled. I was humbled not only by the enthusiasm, but how people were moved, either to see themselves or to learn stories they never heard. That never ceases to amaze me. I’m even thinking about the members of the stuntmen’s organization, how when you’re inside, you may take something for granted, but their excitement and pride that what we’re doing—what we’re all doing collectively—really can change minds, change hearts, and provide a balm to the soul,” Reece said.



As the 1990s came to an end, Willie’s life gradually improved. He still had daily pain, his knees kept deteriorating, and he still had to

undergo the occasional knee surgery. He was not improving physically, in fact it was just the opposite, as his knees continued to worsen. Mentally, however, things improved dramatically. He had stopped drinking heavily, which helped him let go of the anger about his physical state, what the Air Force had done to him, and the hatred for people who mistreated him in the past. His outlook turned more positive, and it was aided by the fact that he started spending time with Cheryl Pritchett. Willie had known Cheryl for years and they had been friends when he lived outside Los Angeles in the 1970s. In 1998 Cheryl relocated from Texas back to California, and they became a couple, eventually marrying in 2006.

Cheryl shared the burden of Willie's physical limitations. They never went out dancing and were not even able to go for walks together, as Willie's knee injuries prevented him from even walking around the block since the 1990s. But Cheryl reveled in Willie's buoyant spirit and enthusiasm, and they were simpatico.

Willie knew he was in a much better place mentally after he got together with Cheryl, and he was thankful.

"Last eight, nine, 10 years has been a hell of a change on me and my thinking and my lifestyle of being what I want to be. And trying to, I think I learned how to deal with pain and hurt. It took many years to deal with that. Even after all of the surgery that I've had, I'm dealing with that now, and it's always good to have a good woman on your side," Willie said in 2016.

Just because he was more at peace with everything he dealt with his in his life, that does not mean that he stopped fighting against injustice and pointing out wrongs committed in the past. He wanted people who have conveniently short memories to wake up and acknowledge that the way blacks have been treated in this country is outrageous and cannot be accepted.

“See that's the difference. You can have this, but you don't want me to have it. I heard this all the time; we are not intelligent enough. I remember when there weren't any black quarterbacks in the NFL. Marlin Briscoe was the first one. They called him The Magician. As he was gettin' good enough to really do things, well, the word got out. You can't have no black guy runnin' no football team. They changed him into a wide receiver, and they phased him out. 'Cause he ain't supposed to be good enough to do this. It goes back to basketball. The people in Boston would go see Bill Russell, but he couldn't go to some of the exclusive restaurants there. Like the blacks fought in World War II, and came back here, and couldn't even sit down in a lunch counter and have a decent cup of coffee. Those are the things that made so many people angry. And these people that are runnin' the show, you take like some of your top senators and stuff, they don't pay attention or either that they don't give a damn. They say, ‘Well I don't know what's wrong with you, this is America, everyone is free’. But look how long we've been slapped down in America. Look how many times that we've worked all day for nothing,” Willie said.

Willie often thought about his odyssey from picking cotton to his NBA dreams, to the Air Force, and his work with the Black Stuntmen's Association. It had been a wild ride with so many heartbreaking moments, but many other euphoric triumphs. How did he get there? What factors came together to shape his life?

“I've thought many times, and stayed at work many nights, tryin' to figure out how did I get there? What made me different from anyone else? What was my calling to do these things? Then I got to thinking about what my mom said, and my mom couldn't read or write, but she told me: always respect your elders, always try to do the right thing. Son, nobody is perfect, but it takes someone to rise up against certain things to change things. And after the military, and

I got to thinking about how I was shot up and how I was used to play basketball to get the base that I was stationed at the publicity for the base commander and all of that stuff, and after that I got to thinkin' well maybe it's time for me to step up to the plate. And I started steppin' up to the plate before I got out of the military. Because I spent four months after my discharge fightin' for my rights because of what they did to me. They used me. They crippled me. And I wasn't going to accept just walking out like a dog with my tail tucked between my legs without fightin' back, and that's what started all of this, and I said from then on, whatever I get involved in, I wasn't goin' to be used and abused. I was gonna stand up for my rights, and I'm gonna stand up other people's rights who can't stand up for themselves. That's how I got there," Willie said.