

INTRODUCTION

Willie Harris was many things: loyal, persistent, charismatic, sensitive, wise, confident, welcoming, proud, inspirational, determined, loving, and very, very tall.

The first time I heard him speak was in May 2016 while I was listening to a segment of NPR's StoryCorps. I was struck by the sound and character of his voice as he talked about his time growing up in Mississippi under Jim Crow and his battles against racism with the Black Stuntmen's Association in Hollywood. I could hear the passion. He had seen a lot, and felt a lot, and he wanted you to know about it. All of that came clearly through my car radio and I knew that his life story needed to be told. I knew it was an improbable tale of struggle, sacrifice, and accomplishment. I immediately knew all of that, and the segment was only two and a half minutes long. That is how compelling Willie was.

When I called him at his home and told him I wanted to help him tell his story, he immediately and enthusiastically said he would be happy to partner with me on this project.

After I started talking to him a few times a week I learned so much more about his life in Mississippi, his year in Chicago, his service in the Air Force, and his time with the Black Stuntmen's

Association, and it was all much richer and more fascinating that I could have fathomed.

Willie's height helped him navigate life in many ways. When you meet someone who is 6'8" you are not likely to forget him, especially someone who has something important to tell you, whether you like it or not. When he saw something that he thought was wrong, he would talk to anyone who he thought could help make it right, and he would talk to them again if he didn't succeed at first. His height got people to notice he was there, but once they started talking to him, they didn't want to stop because he was so engaging. His height helped make him an exceptional basketball player, but also contributed to some intense physical challenges that he dealt with for most of his life.

This book tells the entirety of Willie's life story, and his personal journey is complemented by insights and scenes from the lives of those closest to him, as well as historical information that contextualizes all the events in his life. The stories of Willie and his family and friends are presented here as they were told to me. There is language that is difficult to read and incidents that are painful to think about, but they are all true.

I found all aspects of Willie's experience to be enthralling and educational, and I wrote this book as a tribute to his legacy, as well as for those in his life who faced the same challenges. I hope you find it to be illuminating, entertaining, inspiring, and worthwhile.

Tim Shea

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