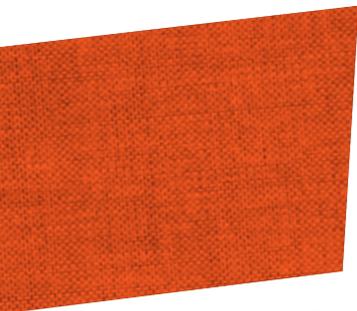
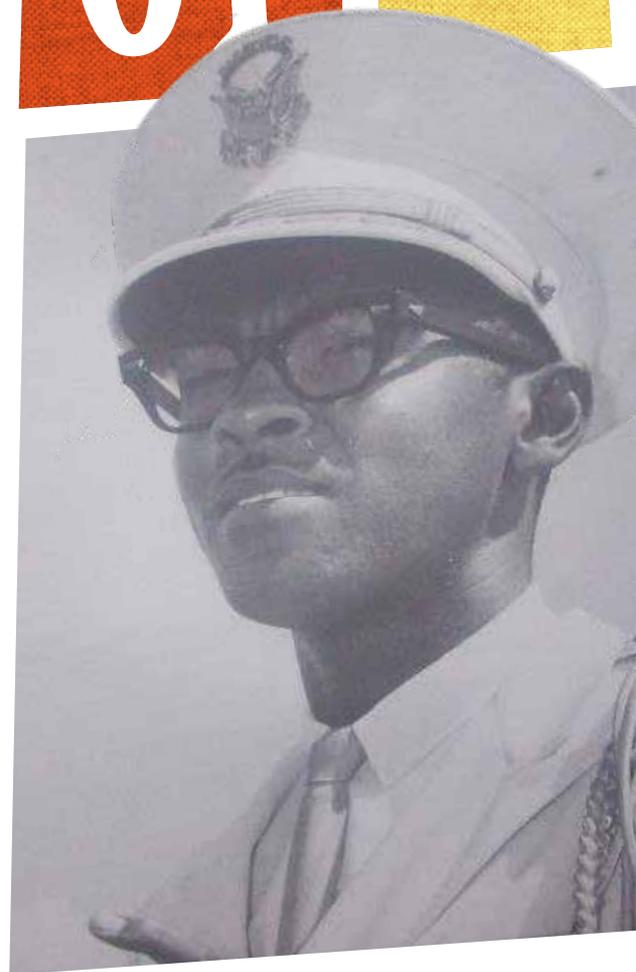




A

TALE

OF





TWO BANDS

BY JEFFREY C. BILLMAN '01 '10MA

Orlando in the early 1900s wasn't Selma or Little Rock — those places that have come to be synonymous with the violent struggles and outrages and protests of the Civil Rights Movement.

Orlando, however, was segregated. Parramore, an African-American neighborhood named for a former mayor and Confederate captain, was cut off from downtown and white society by the newly constructed Interstate 4.

There was systemic white supremacy. As in many parts of the country, white kids went to better schools; their parents had better opportunities.

There were protests — black high schoolers arrested for trying to order from the lunch counter at Woolworth's — and violence — in November 1920 a white mob killed 50 or 60 African Americans in Ocoee in effort to suppress black voting, to cite just one example. But by mid-century, the city's officials tried to tamp down tensions before they

metastasized. The City Beautiful was careful to project an image of peaceful coexistence to the outside world.

There was some truth to this projection, at least relative to the rest of the South. Segregated though it was, Parramore thrived, full of art, commerce and wealth. And at the center of it was Jones High School, the black high school established in 1895.

"It was central to the community," says Ben Brotemarkle, executive director of the Florida Historical Society. "Everybody in the community went there. It had some pretty prominent graduates over the years. Of course, Chief Wilson was a pretty big part of that."

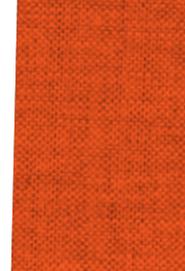
By Chief Wilson, he means the late James W. Wilson, who died in December at age 90. From 1950 to 1990, Wilson taught music at Jones

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and led its marching band to greatness. And in 1964, as Southern senators were filibustering the Civil Rights Act, Wilson and his band — a hundred parents and students in total, many of whom had never before left the state of Florida — took a trip to New York City that fundamentally reshaped the city he called home the rest of his life.

"I might be taking too much credit, but we were the catalyst for the integration of the whole community," Wilson once said.

He wasn't taking too much credit. If anything, Wilson was taking too little. Not only did this trip to the World's Fair help facilitate the desegregation of Orlando, but the harmonious image it sent to the world just might have prodded a certain theme park entrepreneur to give Orlando a closer look.



By the early 1960s, he was Jones' full-time band director, and he'd made them a premier institution in Orlando.

They were the best in town — even if they were from the proverbial wrong side of the tracks — and everyone knew it. They played at events everywhere in Orlando, on the white and black sides of town. Along the way, Wilson forged partnerships with white business owners and musicians, and became friends with Del Kieffner, the demanding, crew-cut former marine who ran the marching band at Edgewater.

"He was a very good friend of mine," Wilson says in the documentary. "And we always protected our relationship. We fostered the integration of our professional organizations because of our relationship with each other."

Then came the 1964–65 World's Fair in New York City. Bands from all over the country sent in films of their performances, seeking an invitation to perform at this marquee event. Edgewater got one. Jones did not.

That decision produced some discontent among Orlando's African-American community, to say the least. Nothing against Edgewater, but Chief's band was more exciting, more cutting-edge, more in demand, lauded with awards and honors and



This is the story that the documentary *Marching Forward* aims to tell — the trip to the World's Fair, but not just that.

It's about the nuances of race relations in Orlando during the latter days of Jim Crow and the unlikely friendship between Wilson and Del Kieffner, the white bandleader at Edgewater High School that turned the city upside down. It's about tireless devotion to musical excellence and innovation and the foundation of traditions that remain to this day. And it's about how all of that maybe — just maybe — helped lure Walt Disney World to Central Florida.

In other words, it's a complex, layered story, difficult for even a skilled documentarian to pack into a 60-minute feature. The accomplishment is all the more remarkable when you consider that it was pieced together by two professors and a handful of UCF students, some of whom had no background in documentary filmmaking — and even more so when you realize that it's a good film on its own merits, smartly crafted and edited, with poignant interviews interspersed with archival footage and animation.

This is the fourth documentary that Associate Professor of History Robert Cassanello and Associate Professor of Film Lisa Mills have made in the past decade along with students in their *Honors Advanced Documentary Workshop* class. The most recent, *Filthy Dreamers*, completed in 2014, won an Emmy in the College Television Awards in 2016.

But *Marching Forward*, which is scheduled to premiere at the Florida Film Festival in April, is Cassanello and Mills' most ambitious endeavor. That's not just because it's the first feature-length film, meaning it's twice as long as their other projects, but

also because it's the first examining events that took place in their backyard.

"For the previous films, we consciously chose a subject matter outside the area," Cassanello says. But for this project, they wanted to do something local. And in the fall of 2015, Cassanello was part of a panel in Kissimmee that was doing a retrospective on the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. One of his co-panelists was an *Orlando Sentinel* writer who brought up the Jones High band and its trip to the World's Fair in 1964. Cassanello and Mills were intrigued.

"We've seen many documentaries about the well-known heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. Chief and Del are the unsung heroes. They took risks and did what was right despite the color lines of the time. That took courage."

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The not-simple story goes like this: When Wilson, a graduate of Florida A&M's marquee Marching 100 arrived at Jones as a history teacher in 1950, Orange County's school system had no music department or music teachers. None of his students had, or could play, an instrument. A no-nonsense disciplinarian who carried a wooden paddle named Justice, Wilson both was feared and beloved; with help from the community, he scoured pawn shops and attics for spare instruments, and worked in lessons and band practice around his history classes.

distinctions. The only reason they were being shut out of the trip to the Big Apple was the color of their skin. It was such an obvious truth that there was no sense denying it.

Jones' loyalists wrote letters to the newspapers and put pressure on city leaders. It didn't take long for the city to come around: Both bands would go, white and black. Not at the same time, but they would go — if they each could raise the required \$25,000, and a little over \$128 per member. The schools did bake sales, rummage sales, you name it, separate at first. But on a few occasions, the schools partnered with each other, black and white kids



washing cars and participating in community fundraisers.

Then, two white girls from Edgewater and two black girls from Jones were photographed together on the front page of the *Orlando Sentinel*, the paper's first photo where blacks and whites were in the same picture. Most "black" news then was relegated to the separate Negro section, which was printed on pink paper.

Realizing what the story of sending black and white bands to New York would show the world, the *Sentinel's* publisher, Martin Anderson, got his paper behind Jones High's effort, selling trees to fund the trip. And Wilson and Kieffner together asked the city and county for equal funding for both groups, making it all but impossible for politicians to give Jones less.

"I don't think there was much intentionality on the part of city leaders," Cassanello says. "I think they were shamed into inviting Jones. They were also shamed into providing Jones with equal funding."

"We integrated the system more or less, by the kids and other bands seeing us working together. It made a very harmonious thing in this particular district," Wilson told the film crew. "Then we started meeting together and we broke down a lot of barriers."

Edgewater went in May 1964, right before finals; Jones in July, with a stop in Washington, D.C., the week President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act.



Importantly, as Rick Foglesong, author of *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando*, told filmmakers, that World's Fair was a "proving ground" for the Disney Company, which was looking to build a theme park east of the Mississippi. It was there that Disney showcased the inspiration for and technology behind such park staples as It's a Small World, the Carousel of Progress and the PeopleMover. Seven years later, Kieffner, with Wilson's help, organized the marching band parade for the opening of Walt Disney World.

That these two events are connected, as Foglesong suggests, may be a stretch. It certainly involves conjecture. But if there's even a kernel of truth to it, then those bands' trips were more important to the city of Orlando and the state of Florida than anyone involved could have possibly imagined.

Orlando was different. Orlando *had to* be different. If it wasn't different then — if the image it projected to the world in 1964 looked more like the Deep South and less than an oasis of relative racial tranquility — the Orlando of 2018 would be a radically different place. No Disney World. Which would almost certainly have meant no Universal Studios, no Sea World, no I-Drive, no explosion of population growth and a hospitality industry to match, no tourism base to put the city of Orlando on the map, likely a much smaller University of Central Florida.

All of that can be traced, at least indirectly to Jones' and Edgewater's bands traveling to Manhattan 54 years ago.

"The context is so important," Foglesong says. "It's the mid-'60s. Florida was in the South, but it's not Birmingham. Disney didn't want to be in Birmingham. Here you have something from Orlando that reflects well on the city as the kind of place where the Disney Company might want to be at a time when the Disney Company is a big hit at the fair."

Perhaps Walt Disney never noticed those two Orlando bands — Cassanello admits the film is engaging in some speculation, that the dates simply align. But their presence didn't hurt, and it told the story

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Orlando wanted to tell about itself, even if that story wasn't the whole truth. (After all, a few years later, when Orange County schools started to desegregate, it just so happened that the mostly white schools got the most renowned black teachers — including, for one semester before he insisted on returning to Jones, Wilson — while the mostly black schools got the least experienced white teachers.) Certainly, if Orlando was beset by racial strife, if it was another Birmingham, Disney would have looked elsewhere.

Regardless, Jones' trip was a seminal moment for Orlando's civil rights evolution.

"I don't know how big an impact it had on the white community," Brotemarkle says. "It certainly was a major milestone for the African-American community. It certainly instilled a sense of pride and was a major accomplishment that the entire community got behind. In that regard, it was a big contributor to the Civil Rights Movement. It provided a strong sense of community, a feeling of pride in the community that was important in that time."

After desegregation, he points out, Parramore languished. Wealthier black families moved out, because they had choices; slumlords and homeless shelters moved in. City revitalization efforts sputtered and faltered.

This story, Brotemarkle says, could go a long way in reinstilling the neighborhood's sense of pride. "I think knowing the history of your community can always make you feel more connected to where you're living."

And maybe this film could the same for today's students at Jones.

"A lot of people don't know what African Americans went through in the '50s and '60s," says Barbara Burns, a majorette on that '64 Jones marching band who later taught math at Jones for 28 years. "And I think it

would enlighten some of the students at Jones to see the struggle that Jones went through to be as great as they are now. When I was in school there, there were no white people around, no students, no teachers — we had to go out of town to play, where there was a black school. By the two schools coming together, it made a difference, and people could see that all people are the same."

She continues: "When I had children, I made sure they didn't feel inferior. This film is going to show how far we've come, and how two men and music brought these schools together."

