

Gardner-Webb University

Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University

Gardner-Webb NewsCenter Archive

Gardner-Webb Publications

1-31-2012

The Race of His Life

Office of University Communications

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/gardner-webb-newscenter-archive>

The Race of His Life

 webpublish.gardner-webb.edu/newscenter/the-race-of-his-life/

Office of University Communications

January 31, 2012

It was 1964 and a young African American named George Surratt was determined to beat the odds. There had never been a black male to attend Gardner-Webb Junior College, but his dream was bigger than historical precedent.

It was bigger even than the financial and familial circumstances that turned Surratt's sprint through college into a marathon. But when he finally crossed the finish line, Surratt solidified his legacy as the first African American male to attend Gardner-Webb and the first to letter in track and field, and he says the knowledge and relationships he gained along the way were well worth the challenges of his journey.

Surratt was born and raised near campus in Boiling Springs, N.C. His father was a poor sharecropper, and then a custodian at Gardner-Webb, and his mother took care of Surratt and his brothers and sisters before working at Gardner-Webb as a cook. Surratt remembers his home as a happy one, full of love and compassion.

He also remembers running—constantly running, whether it was up and down hills in his landlord's cow fields or up and down baseball fields and basketball courts. Surratt developed exceptional athleticism and speed, and after graduating from Green Bethel High School in Boiling Springs, his dream was to play football at then Gardner-Webb Junior College.

“I turned down two scholarships to black colleges so I could attend Gardner-Webb. I didn't want to leave home,” said Surratt. He first enrolled in the fall of '64 and soon after sought out Head Football Coach Norman Harris. “Before I got to practice with the team,” Surratt remembered, “Coach Harris told me some things he felt I should know. He said because I wasn't on scholarship like the rest of the team, I had to prove myself even more. He also said that some people in the stands at the games might call me names, or try to provoke me, and he wanted my word that I wouldn't let it effect me. I told him it wouldn't bother me.”

A car accident robbed him of his first semester, so Surratt never suited up for the Runnin' Bulldogs football squad. But he practiced with the team long enough for people to notice his speed. One of those people was his teammate Jim Nolan of Bennettsville, S.C., who Surratt says is “still my best friend.” Nolan suggested that Surratt try out for track and field and then, Surratt said, “taught me everything he knew, like how to hold my hands, how to breathe, and how to cross the finish line. I broke a lot of records in that spring of '65.”

Surratt competed in the 100m, the 200m, the 400m relay, the 800m relay, and the mile relay. But his best race was the 400m individual. He went undefeated in that event in 1967 and qualified for Nationals, but the College couldn't afford to send him to compete.

Surratt also received support in the classroom from his teachers, even despite a persistent stutter that made it difficult for him to participate in class discussion. He mentioned the patience of one instructor in particular. “Dr. (Vann) Murrell was my Religion 101 teacher. He helped prepare me to make public speeches and what to say. I spoke at some churches. He even helped me after I graduated.”

Interestingly, despite the struggles and fear he must have overcome in taking such a bold step toward equality by enrolling and competing at Gardner-Webb, Surratt shies away from questions about race. Unless, of course, you’re curious about his recordsetting races on the tracks at Gardner-Webb in the early ’60s. He says his teammates, professors and the administration were all consistently supportive.

Due to several years of military service and then the demands of a full-time working schedule, Surratt would not graduate until 1976, earning a bachelor’s degree from the Institution that was a junior college when he first enrolled. His perseverance even influenced his younger brother Tony Nathaniel, who also attended GW. They would graduate together in December of that year. “I remember our father gave us each a two dollar bill when we graduated. That meant more to me than receiving a Mercedes, because I knew where it came from. It came from his heart,” Surratt said.

Surratt and his wife of 42 years, Carolyn, have five children, eight grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. At 65, Surratt still works today for Baldor Industries in Kings Mountain, N.C., and says he remembers his Gardner-Webb days fondly.