

Bobby Patton: a real hero

By TOM REAY
Executive Editor

High school heroes are normally easy to define.

The football star, the captain of the basketball team, the dashing lead in the school play, the senior class president. . .

Well, Bobby Patton was a high school hero but he was none of those things.

He was a different sort of champion but at Auburn High School he was a High School Hero none the less.

Bobby was not a student. He was 36 years of age. On his second marriage and his second career. He had started as a teacher's aide and in four years was an administrative assistant to the principal.

And he was the high school trouble shooter who handled angry parents, subdued fighting

Insight special



Bobby Patton

"ends meet" would be even more difficult — perhaps impossible — now.

"FUNNY THING," SAID an associate who had known Bobby back when he worked at the Chrysler plant. "The heart attack really changed his life. That and his marriage to Ginny. Things started to change for Bobby then and all for the better."

The marriage was not an easy decision. Bobby was black and Virginia white. And Bobby was concerned about what he could do, how long he would live.

"We'd been engaged for two years," said Mrs. Patton. "I could see no racial barriers and neither did Bobby. He was that type. I said let's go ahead and get married and he was reluctant but finally we did."

At about the same time, then Auburn Principal John Wyeth was seeking someone to fill an ombudsman type role at the high school where, in the past few years, there had been instances of racial strife.

Oscar Blackwell, then an employe of the Rockford Park District, remembered a likely candidate and recommended him to Wyeth.

"I interviewed Bobby at some length," he recalled "and I was most impressed. He was a sort of liaison person. His title was that of a hall monitor, but as time wore on he became more than that. He was our trouble shooter.

"It was a difficult time. We'd had trouble in previous years. I remember just recently someone was asking me how we turned things around at Auburn and I said the most important factor was Bobby Patton."

IT WAS EARLY in Bobby's tenure at Auburn that he came across two groups of boys — one black and one white — gathering outside on the parking lot. A fight appeared in the offing.

Bobby — who was stocky but not big — carried a large stick in his right hand. He walked up to one group, grasped the largest youth by the back of the shirt collar, then did the same with the a representative from the second group, and marched off into school with an announcement that "We've got some talking to do."

And, when the talking was over, so was the fight.

"The physical route," Wyeth said, "wasn't Bobby's normal style. But the kids knew he was capable of it if necessary."

That's backed up by Miss Eugenia Kemp, assistant principal at Auburn, who recalls Bobby's "warm way" with students, faculty and parents.

"He always seemed happy and it seemed to rub off," she said.

Mrs. Nancy Beagley, an English teacher at Auburn, recalls one instance where the mother of a student came storming into the office, obviously upset over a problem involving her youngster.

"The mother was shouting and not listening at all. Bobby listened to her for a moment and then, in a quiet voice, said:

"Oh, with all this anger about, we really can't understand one another. Let's just sit down and cool off."

"Bobby sat down. So did the mother. And in a few minutes they were talking and the problem was on its way to being solved."

HIS TROUBLE SHOOTING extended to the faculty as well as to the students.

"Sometimes," recalled Mrs. Beagley, "he'd find one of us agitated over a student. He'd ask what the problem was, listen, and then, in his easy way, suggest a positive solution.

"Then he'd suggest that he'd probably be seeing the student that weekend over at the recreation center later on. 'Let me talk to him' he'd say. And somehow, things would always work out for the best."

Many Patton-to-student conversations took place during the lunch hour. Bobby most often ate with the students, shunning the faculty lounge. There he would share some of his philosophy and thoughts on "getting along together" over a sandwich and a glass of milk.

"But somehow," said former Principal Wyeth, "he never assumed the identity of a buddy. He was always the adult. Nevertheless, he could communicate on their level."

students, and calmed racial differences with a firm but understanding hand.

That's a tough assignment but Bobby Patton handled it with a smile and a sense of humor.

The students and fellow faculty members at Auburn, however, really didn't recognize him for the hero he was until late this fall when Bobby Patton was walking down the hallway and had a heart attack.

Thirty-three minutes later, at Rockford Memorial Hospital, Bobby Patton was pronounced dead on arrival.

BOBBY PATTON WAS born in Fulton, Ky. His father worked on the railroad. He was a better than average student and attended Lane College in Jackson, Tenn., for three years.

The next dozen years were not, as Bobby Patton recalled them, his best years.

"It was just a case of making ends meet," he told a friend a few months ago in recollection of those times. Personal success just did not seem to come, no matter how hard he tried. His once pleasant marriage floundered and there was a divorce.

He had a job in a Rockford foundry, but he also worked part time with the park district recreation program and at Concord recreation center.

"That," said the friend, "he seemed to like best. He related to the kids and they did to him."

Then at age 32, there was another blow. A heart attack. Then another and still another. Bobby Patton was on the bottom going down at age 32. With his heart in the condition it was, he could no longer work in the foundry. Making

is where it's at