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## 1968 visit by George Wallace, riots, state tourney loss left lasting mark on Central High

By Erin Duffy / World-Herald staff writer

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Steve Marantz  
Handout

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**I**n a lively talk, panelists revisited a time and a place where sports, politics and racial tensions collided — Omaha Central High in 1968.

Susie Buffett and author Steve Marantz, both Central graduates, led the Thursday night discussion centering on the events of Marantz's 2011 book, "The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central."

The book chronicles the intense highs and lows that marked Central's 1968 basketball season. The team made headlines with its all-black starting lineup — nicknamed the Rhythm Boys — and its stunning loss in the state tournament.

The loss followed a campaign stop by segregationist and then-presidential hopeful George Wallace that sparked riots in Omaha and led to the arrest of the team's star player, Dwaine Dillard.

In Central's auditorium, panelists reflected on the chaos and vitriol that Wallace's visit ignited, the pride the school took in its trailblazing team and the sometimes uneasy racial relations that still exist in Omaha today.

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The panel included Phil Griffin, a member of the 1968 team; former State Sen. Brenda Council; current Central boys' basketball coach Eric Behrens; Rod Mullen, a Central social studies and African-American history teacher; and Central senior and basketball player Austin McGaugh. The talk was organized by the Child Saving Institute.

Griffin said the cultural and political undercurrents of spring 1968 had little effect on him and his fellow teammates.

“Our concern was winning the state championship,” he said.

Of course, that didn't happen.

Wallace, notorious for his pledge of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever,” visited Omaha on the eve of the state tournament as part of his third-party campaign for president and immediately drew protests.

Dillard and several other teenagers were arrested two nights later, leading his coach to suspend him from the first tournament game. The tournament also was moved from Omaha's Civic Auditorium to Lincoln due to fears over violence.

Rattled, the Central team lost to Lincoln Northeast.

“It was kind of devastating,” Griffin said. “The only reason I ever played any competitive sports was winning, to win championships.”

Council, Buffett and Marantz recalled a school that was diverse but still mired in social, if not legal, segregation.

“It was the first time in my life I had been around that many non-African-Americans,” Council said. “One of the things you noticed and was almost kind of natural, was at lunch, you'd go in the cafeteria and the white students would sit together and the black students would sit together. It was just a function of being with people you knew.”

But on the basketball court, questions of color, class, religion faded.

“We were basketball players. We did not care too much about politics, about color,” said Harvey Josin, a Rhythm Boys teammate who spoke at the end of the program. “If you could shoot a 20-foot jumper, we were OK with you.”

Council remembered hearing people fret about Wallace's impending visit and then watching the fires burn the night of the 1968 riots, when she was 15.

“During 1968, the Wallace stuff going on, you couldn't escape it,” she said. “It was on television, in the news. That's what offended us so much about Wallace coming here to Nebraska. We hadn't been exposed to anyone like George Wallace in Nebraska. We didn't believe we needed that here in Omaha.”

Behrens and Mullen talked about reading the book and discussing it with their students, who were born decades after the civil rights movement.

When talking about history, “I tell them the more things change, the more they stay the same, and history repeats itself,” Mullen said.

The heavy themes of the talk didn't mean there wasn't room for levity, though.

Griffin and McGaugh engaged in a little good-natured trash talking when Marantz asked the Central senior who would win today: his championship Central team or the Rhythm Boys?

“On Mr. Phil Griffin's best day and our best day, we would have beaten the Rhythm Boys,” McGaugh said with a grin.

Griffin shook his head in mock disbelief.

The look back at the tumultuous 1968 season won kudos from Carlos Dillard, Dwaine Dillard's younger brother. He drove from Des Moines to hear the panel.

Dwaine Dillard died in 2008.

“He had no idea people felt this much about him,” Dillard said. “No idea. None. So I want to thank everybody for just bringing his name up. It breaks my heart he can't hear it.”

