

## John Buck O'Neil

This week our country has observed the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a Supreme Court decision that desegregated classrooms, Brown v. the Board of Education. Also this week Major League Baseball has agreed to pay compensation to a number of men who played in the Negro Leagues before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947 and integrated our national pastime.

Today it is hard to imagine a country of segregated classrooms and ball fields, but it happened, right here in the USA. The athletes who played in the Negro Leagues possessed skills equal to those of players in the majors, and many Negro League players were just flat out better. Today their accomplishments are better documented and recognized in halls of fame, history books, and souvenir uniforms.

For years, John Buck O'Neil, an outstanding Negro League player who teamed up with some of the best, has been telling stories about the wonderful years of his professional career. For years, nobody listened. But then a man named Ken Burns prepared a televised documentary on baseball, and he interviewed Buck O'Neil. Buck never changed his story, but all of a sudden, people started listening. Kansas City, Missouri, is now the proud home of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, and the proud home of its greatest ambassador, Buck O'Neil.

Several years ago - and I don't expect Buck to remember this - I had lunch with this man and a mutual friend at a restaurant on the Plaza in Kansas City. Buck also gave me tickets to a Royals game that week - just wanted to remind you of that, Buck. I came away from that lunch convinced that I had met not just one of the greatest athletes in the country, but one of the greatest Christians in the country. He was so inspiring, I wanted him to come preach at my church. Graduates, you are about to meet a man who walked with giants, a man who believes in God, a man who deserves to be listened to not just because of what he has to say about baseball, but because of what he has to say about life. Ladies and gentlemen, Buck O'Neil.