

Remarkable Individuals Journey To Lea County And Enrich Our Lives

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During a forty-eight hour period last week, I had the great pleasure and distinct honor to be around and visiting with several remarkable individuals whose gifts include being able to tell history and to make history, activities that reflected their knowledge of our nation as a whole and their interests in America at the local level.

I came away from the three days (Monday afternoon until Wednesday afternoon) thinking that such experiences as I had would only happen in America, and I came away from the visits thanking my lucky stars for having briefly been with the individuals.

In the order with which I met them, those men and women were Steve Townsend, the author of "Jal"; U.D. Black, the author of "The Light Side of Little Texas"; Michael Beschloss, the author of "Presidential Courage"; Joe Byers, the curator of the exhibit "The Ellis Byers Room"; Tom Black, an outstanding athlete and teacher; Ray Birmingham, a remarkable coach and teacher; and Kathy Whitworth, one of the greatest professional athletes in American sports history.

Those seven outstanding individuals are living in Lea County now, were visiting Lea, or were returning home to Lea to celebrate the rich life offered to all of us Americans.

These individuals serve us locally and contribute to the nation by their intellectual and physical accomplishments, and to tell you the truth, the experiences I had with them and what I learned from them made me feel very patriotic and proud of my community and of my country.

Steve Townsend, who teaches history at New Mexico Junior College, came to the Lea

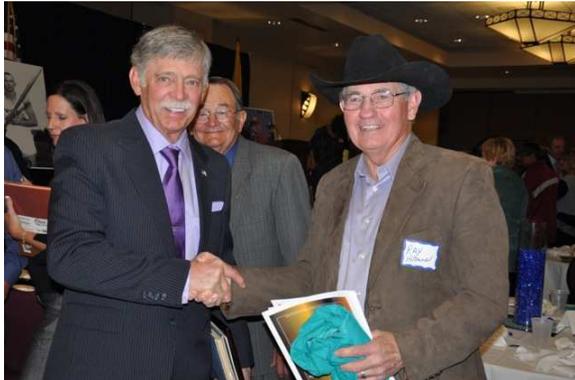
County Museum to sign copies of his book "Jal," which tells the story of Lea's southernmost community, and to discuss the writing of that book and his book "The Yankee Invasion of Texas."

U.D. Black traveled from his home in Idaho to Lea County to attend the induction of his brother Tom into the Lea County Athletic Hall of Fame, but he also came back home to sign copies of his remembrance, "The Light Side of Little Texas," which relates his life growing up here in the southeastern corner of New Mexico. He also signed copies of several other of the books he has written.

Joe Byers has made his home in Lea County for most of the 87 years of his life, and he has written about the history of Lea in his book "The Grandma Hobbs Affair." But he was in the news for another reason last week when the museum had the grand opening for the exhibit he curated and built, The Ellis Byers Room located on the second floor of the museum's Lister Building.

Michael Beschloss is the author of fourteen books on American presidents, including "The Conquerors," a lengthy telling of Franklin D. Roosevelt's and Harry Truman's efforts to ensure that Germany, following World War II, would never again drag nations into a confrontation costing the world millions of lives. Beschloss was brought to the county by the J. F Maddox Foundation, and he lectured to and answered questions from students during the day and adults attending an evening program at Hobbs High School.

Tom Black traveled to Lea from his home in Albuquerque to be inducted into the Lea County Athletic Hall of Fame, an activity that also allowed him to visit with many family members and friends from his days of growing up in Lovington and attending Lovington schools. Like several members of his family, Tom is an outstanding athlete, an All-American, and he is a man who has brought pride to his community by his athletic and artistic accomplishments.



Tom Black and past inductee Ray Hilburn

Ray Birmingham is another Lea County-raised man who has excelled in numerous of his life pursuits. Ray is the first baseball coach of the University of the Southwest Mustangs and the first coach of the New Mexico Junior College Thunderbirds. He is also the current baseball coach of the University of New Mexico Lobos. He was a national champion coach at the junior college, and one day he will be a national champion coach at UNM.



Ray Birmingham

Kathy Whitworth, who grew up in Jal and graduated from Jal High School, has won more professional golf tournaments (88 championships) than anyone, male or female. A motivating and inspiring speaker, she has spent her life giving to the communities in which she has lived and in enjoying time with young people and with her many fans and friends.



Kathy Whitworth with Rev. B. J. Choice

Here are their names again: Steve Townsend, U.D. Black, Joe Byers, Michael Beschloss, Tom Black, Ray Birmingham, and Kathy Whitworth.

Now that is an impressive and exemplary group of individuals. I want to call them the Magnificent Seven.

And all of them right here for three days in the heart of Lea County!

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I kept asking myself last week, “How can I be so lucky? How can it be that Lea is so lucky?”

It was similar to a question I hear all the time: “How could small Lea County produce so many outstanding athletes in so many different sports?”

I usually answer that question with a humorous response: “It must be the water.”

Visiting with historian Michael Beschloss last week, I asked a related question: “What qualities did our outstanding American presidents have that made them the great leaders they were?”

And in his answers and in his books he said the great presidents had many essential traits, including being able to make necessary but unpopular decisions, having the skill to persuade, and possessing a knowledge of history.

In reading two of his books over the last two months, and in listening to his lecture last week in Hobbs, I concluded that Beschloss sure knows his subject, and that all Americans, including our leaders, would profit from knowing even a small portion of the history he knows.

I also decided last week that my community and I profited from the presence of the six other individuals I have named in this History Notebook. In their diversity and with their talents, Steve Townsend, U.D. Black, Joe Byers, Tom Black, Ray Birmingham, and Kathy Whitworth all help make America the unique, productive, and powerful nation that it is.

In these turbulent international times, when little seems permanent, when leaders and countries come and go, I worry about the long-

term fate of my nation. In the dark night of the soul, I ask myself,

“What will be the shape of America a century from now or two centuries from now?”

And it’s in the bright light of the American spirit that I answer, “If the country continues to produce men and women like the ones I met last week, America will be just fine.”