Prologue

It was a clear sunny Saturday morning in March of 2009. I was at the Fred Babcock Post #555 VFW Club in Richfield, Minnesota. I was in the post's dining hall, which was on the east side of the building. Windows lined the east and south walls, and the bright sunlight of late winter was streaming in. There were tables and chairs throughout the room, and the place was about half full of patrons, all of them enjoying the hearty breakfasts that the club was known for. The room was full of the smell of coffee and the sounds of conversation and laughter.

I was the head boys' basketball coach at Richfield High School. The VFW Club and the American Legion were both generous donors to my program. My team had just finished eating, while sitting at the long tables with the white linen tablecloths. After the meal, the players left in small groups. My four senior starters had taken longer to leave. After about ten minutes they stood and slowly walked out of the club. All four young men were African-American. They all had short fade hair-cuts, no facial hair, they all were wearing well fit stylish jeans pulled up snug, classy athletic shoes, and all four were sporting Richfield High School lettermen's jackets. The jackets were made completely of leather, and the leather was colored cardinal. The only other color on the jackets was the white trim. On the left breast of each jacket was a big R. The four seniors had a very clean-cut look to them.

After talking to the manager for a few minutes, I began to walk out, retracing the steps of the four seniors. As I neared the arched door to the entryway which separated the dining room from the bar, I noticed an old white man sitting alone at the last table. He was facing me and leaning forward with his left hand on his cane. As I neared him, he raised his right hand and looked me in the eye. He appeared to be in his eighties. He was wearing a navy-blue baseball hat adorned with gold-colored letters and small military insignias. He was obviously a World War II veteran. I pointed to his hat and asked him if he fought in Europe or the Pacific.

"The Pacific. Are you the basketball coach?"

"Yes."

"Were those your players?"

"Yes."

He was still looking me directly in the eyes and nodding, "you've got a fine-looking ball club."

"Thank you."

We talked for another five minutes. He wanted to know how the team was doing, and I wanted to know about him. I asked him where he was originally from, how long he had lived in Richfield, where he had worked, and about his family. He gave me the expected answers. He had returned from the war, built a small story and a half house with the GI bill, and he had been active in the community ever since.

Turn the clock back thirty-five years. The scene would have been pretty much the same, with a few obvious differences. The coach would have been Stu Starner. The players would have all been Americans of European descent. They would have had hair flopping down to their eyebrows and even a little over their ears. The snug fitting jeans would have flared near the floor into bell bottoms, and the shoes would have been Adidas or Pumas. The R on the chest of the letter jackets would have been smaller and been framed by a Spartan emblem. These players would have also had a clean-cut look to them.

The veteran might have been wearing the same hat, but he wouldn't have been leaning on the cane. He would have known how many mortgage payments were remaining on his house. And he would have been beginning the discussion with his wife, on how many more years they should work, before a long retirement.

Turn the clock back another fifteen years. The coach would have been Gene Farrell. The players would have all been white kids with crew cuts. The hair would have been just a shadow on the sides, with the top maybe a little longer or a flat top. The jeans would have been snug from top to bottom, and the shoes might have been Converse All-Stars. The letter jackets would have been cardinal with white sleeves. Once again, these kids would have had a very clean-cut look to them.

The veteran most likely wouldn't have been at the VFW. He would have been at home in the rambler eating breakfast with his wife and children, before beginning his to-do list of Saturday morning chores and errands.

Turn the clock back another seventy-five years. The building housing the VFW Club wasn't there. Fred Babcock, the World War I veteran who it was named after wasn't born yet. The place where the building stands would have been the north wood lot of the Bartholomew farm. It would have been a timbered stand of mostly oak trees. The farmer, Riley Bartholomew may have been using the mild late winter day to harvest some firewood, and exercise his

horses. The horses would have been pawing at the ground on the south facing slope looking for early season grass. And the singsong sound of the crosscut saw would have been harmonized by the spring songs of cardinals and chickadees and the drumming of downy woodpeckers.

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When my 2005 Richfield basketball team advanced to state, it ended a 31-year drought of state tournament appearances. I invited two of the alums of the 1973 and 1974 teams to speak to my players. Both the 1973 and 1974 teams lost in the state finals. These were guys who graduated in a class of over 900 students. They both played three sports. They saw the number of boys playing basketball in their grade get winnowed down from 100 players in sixth grade to 30 players in ninth grade to seven or eight players as seniors.

The team was sitting in a circle in the high school gym after practice. Two fit guys in their late forties with short haircuts graying at the temples were standing in the middle. They spent about ten to fifteen minutes telling the story of their back-to-back state runs, noting the support of the students and the community, and their coach Stu Starner. They told the team to enjoy every moment, because it would go so fast. They emphasized to enjoy your buddies, because this group would rarely if ever be together again. Every eye was on them. You could have heard a pin drop.

Then one of them closed the session. I will never forget it.

"You guys don't know how lucky you are. When we played the whole team was white. We didn't have one black kid. We didn't have a kid who was born in Africa, like you," and he pointed at one of our players, who grinned. They all grinned. "We all looked the same. We all lived in the same kind of houses, the houses like you live in, and you live in, and you," and he pointed at some more kids. "We grew up in those houses. It was all that we knew."

"We didn't have any diversity. Look at you guys. You're all different colors. You are so...so lucky. You got buddies who don't look like you. We never got to experience that."

He was animated. He was sincere. He was speaking from the heart. He had attended the Richfield schools from kindergarten through his senior year. He still lived in Richfield. He spent his entire life coming home to one of two similar houses, which were two of the many small houses that were built after World War II.

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I was hired as the basketball coach in the summer of 2001. The program hit rock bottom seven years earlier. My predecessor, Greg Miller, spent the next seven years rebuilding the entire program from the bottom up. I took over from Greg, reaping the benefits of the great job that he did and, with more talent, took the program to the next level. Greg went back to the suburb where he grew up, and took over the successful Robbinsdale Armstrong High School program. His new program remained solidly at that same next level. In the next nine years the successes of both programs mirrored each other.

During this sixteen-year period, the inner ring suburb of Richfield was going through a rapid demographic change. Historically Richfield had been a working-class suburb, with small homes full of large families and apartments full of young couples who had yet to buy their first house. Both the single-family homes and the apartment buildings were filled with almost all European-Americans, or white people. The apartment buildings were now transitioning to small families, many of them minorities and African-Americans. Some of the homes were also being purchased by minority couples who were starting their families.

The demographics of the schools soon reflected this change. Both coaches did everything possible to welcome the minority kids into the program. However, as the head boys' basketball coach I had a few advantages that my predecessor didn't have.

My predecessor had tried to get financial aid for kids who were on reduced and free school lunch so that they could play traveling basketball. The board of the Richfield Boys Basketball Association denied his request. He was a teacher at the high school. I was a CPA. With my business connections, I was able to independently raise the money for the financial aid. The same basketball board then approved this.

I came from coaching at a Minneapolis high school where there were after school study halls for ninth grade athletes. I had seen this succeed in Minneapolis, and I implemented this at Richfield.

For elementary and middle school students, I was able to reduce the fee for the June summer camp, and make the July 3 on 3 league free. I ran free open gyms on June and July evenings and worked with any and all kids who showed up.

I had two young rising assistant coaches who were African-American. And I had the additional advantage of being married to an African-American woman who was a product of the sixties and seventies. My wife Martha was born and raised in Milwaukee. She grew up experiencing and overcoming systemic racism in one of the most segregated cities in the north. She was quick

to point out racial inequities and urged me and my coaching staff to step up and speak out.

In a few short years, the demographic change that started with Coach Miller's teams accelerated. This rapid change of the student body was soon reflected on my teams, and at all levels, and especially at the upper levels of the program. After nine years, including a three-year run of 20-win seasons with two state tournament berths, we were anticipating another three-year run of 20-win seasons. Two years after the district hired a new superintendent whose office entertained a steady parade of disgruntled parents, all homeowners and all white, I was suddenly fired.

In Minnesota, a fired high school coach has the right to an open school board hearing, followed by a vote of school board members to either reinstate the coach or keep him fired. I exercised that right. I listed the positive accomplishments of the program, both athletically and academically. More importantly, I informed the administration, the school board, and the public that if we ran the program the way that the complainers wanted us to run it, it would be a textbook case of institutional/systemic racism backed up with an argument of tokenism. Being a CPA, I supported this statement with definitions, quotes, statistics, and pie graphs. This led to a public debate on why I was fired which included Twin Cities talk show radio.

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I forced the administration to publicly address an issue that I believe they discussed in private, and had done everything that they could to sweep under the carpet. They conceded to the request of these disgruntled parents, as well as a small group of people who called themselves the 'concerned-citizens'. These two groups of people, by unifying, spread their message throughout the community, and influenced many more people. The essence of the message was that I didn't care about the Richfield kids. The public spectacle that was portrayed on the radio and in the newspapers ended up being a black eye for the school administrators.

The discussion also transitioned from institutional/systemic (northern) racism, which I addressed in my speech, to overt (southern) racism which was not a subject in my speech. There were many community members who supported my teams, and who disagreed with and were surprised by the firing. These people experienced the glory years of the high school when the Richfield Spartans, with their cardinal and white uniforms, were synonymous with Lake Conference and state-wide success. Some of these people played on the

championship teams. Others were parents or neighbors of kids who played on those teams. Their pride and loyalty to their community ran deep. Because they weren't at the school board hearing, they never heard my unabridged message. They had to have been confused and upset and hurt, and probably pissed off. This ended up being a black eye for their community.

I thought of the World War II vet sitting in the VFW, and the two basketball alums standing in the gym. They unquestionably did not see color, and they unquestionably welcomed diversity and competition into Richfield. And they were members of two generations of life-long Richfield residents.

I felt good that the administration's cover-up was exposed. I didn't feel good that my supporters and longtime Richfield residents were hurt. For both of these conflicting feelings, I felt the need to set the record straight. When I shared all of this with my inner circle of friends, I was told that I should write a book. This is the result.

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The farmer Riley Bartholomew was no stranger to a controversy about race. As a middle-aged man in northeast Ohio, he would have followed the debates in congress over slavery and state's rights of the 1840s and 1850s. Later, as a General in the Ohio Militia, he and his troops fought alongside and under the direction of the Union Army. Some regiments of the Ohio Militia fought at the battle of Shiloh, the first major bloodbath of the western part of the war. Over 23,000 soldiers were casualties, killed, wounded, or missing. One hundred fifty years later, the debate over the war has been renewed. The debate is deeply divided on geographic lines. Mostly northerners believe that the war was about slavery, while many southerners insist that it was only about state's rights, and that it had nothing to do with slavery or race.

The debate about the Richfield boys' basketball program and my firing was also deeply divided, but along racial lines. Many Richfield white people emphatically and emotionally said, "it had absolutely nothing to do with race." I heard that other Richfield white people refused to even discuss it as a racial issue, "when it comes to race, there is nothing to discuss." They believed it was about Richfield kids losing their spots to kids that weren't Richfield kids, and they believed it was about me recruiting to Richfield these kids who weren't Richfield kids. I talked to a good friend of mine who was white and from Minneapolis. He was removed from the controversy except for following it in the papers. He had brought up the subject. He looked at me, kind of grimaced, and shook his head from side to side, "is it about race? Uh...I don't think so."

Another good friend of mine who was also white and from Minneapolis said the exact opposite, nodding his head emphatically, "there's no question if it was about race." An African-American man who worked many years for the city of Richfield looked me in the eye, pointed his finger at me, and said "what happened to you at Richfield had everything to do with race, and there is no question about that." Many other white people, and every other black person that I knew agreed with this friend. And many of them believed that it centered on one thing, the definition of a 'Richfield kid'.

This book is most certainly a story of high school basketball, youth sports, sports-parents, booster clubs, open enrollment, a northern inner ring suburb, and demographic change. Is it about race and racism? That question is for the reader to decide. Again, most certainly, there will be disagreement.