

“What’s Worth It?” by Micah Pegues

Audio transcript

Julius Pegues: During my senior year in high school, I had the highest grade point average in my class, and I subsequently was named the valedictorian of my class. And during my senior year, we won the state basketball championship for the black schools. It was before integration and de-segregation so that black schools had their own basketball tournament and football, you know, conferences. Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was the state champion in basketball. I went to school in Detroit, Michigan, for one year. I went to Cass Technical High School and to Wayne State University. I took advanced math classes at Cass Technical High, and I took English classes at Wayne State University.

I didn’t even try to go to any other colleges. I could’ve gone to Langston University because I was offered a scholarship there. That’s the only college in the state of Oklahoma that I could’ve gone to because I couldn’t go to the others because of segregation.

My second year out of high school is when I was able to go to the University of Pittsburgh. Now, I had won a couple of scholarships in high school that totaled about \$1,500 and I used those to pay my tuition and fees the first semester, and that money was supplemented by moneys that were given to me by an independent oilman there in Tulsa named E. Alex Phillips. And when I arrived at the University of Pittsburgh, no one there knew that I was a basketball player, except the athletic director. Now, E. Alex Phillips had called the athletic director back in the summer and told him that he was sending him a basketball player. The athletic director told him that Pitt didn’t have anymore scholarships. Alex Phillips told the athletic director, “Well, I’m not worried. You’ll find one for him.” They did. After about three games that I played for the freshman team, they found a scholarship for me and they paid all of my room, board, books, tuition, and fees for the rest of the time I was at the University of Pittsburgh.

I also started every game for the University of Pittsburgh for four straight years. Of course, the first year, we had a freshman team, we had a record of 15-1, the only game we lost was to the West Virginia freshman on their home court and we beat them on our home court.

When I got to Pitt, they had not had a winning season since 1935. My first year there, I played on the freshman team, and our record was 15–1. And the three subsequent years, we had winning records all three years, and we played in two NCAA tournaments when they only selected thirty-two teams, okay? The first year, we lost in the first round, and the second year, we won the first round and we were in the round of sixteen but we were beat in the round of 16. We lost to Notre Dame down in Louisville, Kentucky.

They had not seen black players on white teams down south. I can remember playing at Duke. There were only three black people in the gym, me and the janitors, okay? The old janitor was standing on the sideline and every time I scored, he’d just shake that broom, you know what I mean? I passed by him one time and I told him, “You better be cool, brotha, ’cause no one is up in here but me and you.”

We played in West Virginia, which was kind of loud and raucous, and then we played in Kentucky, we played in North Carolina. We only had one incident. We were in Kentucky once, we were playing at a school. We were playing in a tournament called the All American City Tournament, and after we had finished playing, we went to this little drugstore-deli-like place to get something to eat, and being the captain of the team, I had all of the money. The lady took all of the orders and everything and then when she got to me, she said, “Well, we don’t serve coloreds in here.” So we all just got up and walked out. Everyone. There was only about fourteen of us anyway. On my team, I never did have any problems. Everybody that I played with was nice, although, I was the first black player for the University of Pittsburgh. Yeah, but Poppi could play a little bit, Micah. I sort of controlled the game okay?

My good buddy who played opposite of me, Chuck Hursh was a really good guy, you know what I mean. He was very protective, you know. I didn’t have much problem. I know, we were playing up at Penn State one night, and Mike Ditka, who played football . . . He was playing with me and a guy tripped me going up the sideline, you know. He skinned up my knees and stuff but Mike Ditka came in the game. Mike Ditka was an all-American tight end. He was like 6’4”, 260 lbs. Next thing we knew, Mike had laid this guy head-open underneath the basket. That cut all that roughhousing out, you know.

What was it like being so far from home? I’d just take the court and say, “This is for the homefolk.” I went out to play for them every night, you know. It was a long way from home. It’s 980 miles from Tulsa to Pittsburgh, but it was a good experience, you know. I went there primarily to get an education.

I wanted to be an engineer, so I graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in June of 1959 primarily because it was a five-year course and you needed 139 hours to get an engineering degree from the University of Pittsburgh, okay? I was a student first. I was determined that I was going to get a degree—although I ended up being the first graduate from the Tulsa public school system to be drafted by an NBA team. I never did play, but I was the first one drafted. It was an honor to be the first one. I didn’t find out that I was the first one for about twenty years. I just happened to look back at the drafting of players out of college and the only player from the Tulsa public school system that had been drafted was me, okay? So that was kind of exciting. The St. Louis Hawks. The St. Louis Hawks, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Because pro-basketball players didn’t make that much money back then. Bill Russel, who was probably the best player that was playing, probably only made \$50,000, you know. Oh right, they weren’t making these millions of dollars that they’re making now. I preferred to get a degree so that I’d have something to sustain me for the rest of my life rather than making maybe \$50,000 for four years and then not have anything to fall back on. So, I’ve made lot’s of money as an engineer. I’m a mechanical engineer with an aeronautical option. I’ve been doing what I do for sixty years now.

I went to meteorology school. I went St. Louis Graduate School of Meteorology to become a weather forecaster. I went a whole year to do that, and in meteorology I have everything except a master's degree because they wouldn't let us stay and write a thesis.

The advice I would give you is that achieving a college education is primarily about applying yourself, okay? You have to, you know, do what I call "dedicate yourself" to getting the best education that you can get, all right? It primarily depends on you and how bad you want an education. See, I wanted an education bad. I played basketball, and to play basketball and get an engineering degree is not an easy task, but I made up my mind that that's what I was going to do. The same thing applies for you. You have to want an education. You don't get an education for Poppi or Nana or your mother or your dad. You get an education for you, and you have to apply yourself and you have to be continuously committed to increasing your knowledge.

See because once you have that knowledge, nobody can take that away from you. Okay? That would be my message to you and any other child trying to get through college because I guarantee you. It's worth it.