



1 / Five-foot-long "Coach Temple and the Tigerbelles" photograph, with Wilma Rudolph, fifth from the left. Before digital enhancement. 2 / After digital enhancement.

Caretakers of a Legacy

Track and field champion Wilma Rudolph's childhood in 1940s Clarksville, Tennessee, seems almost incongruous with all she would accomplish as a young adult. She spent much of it in bed, recovering from illness after illness. When Rudolph lost use of her right leg due to polio, her mother drove her 90 miles roundtrip once a week for physical therapy at a Nashville hospital—the nearest one to admit black patients.

No obstacle could stop her, however. By the time she was in high school, Rudolph was an all-state basketball player, and her speed on the court caught the attention of Ed Temple, the track coach at Tennessee State University [TSU]. She attended his college practices while still in high school—qualifying for the 1956 Olympics at age 16—and excelled while on the TSU "Tigerbelles" team in college.

In 1960, at the Olympics in Rome, Rudolph broke several world records to become the "World's Fastest Woman" and won three gold medals—the first American woman to do so in one Olympics. Because Rudolph refused to participate in two separate parades, her welcome-home celebration was the first integrated event in Clarksville.

An oversized photograph of Rudolph, standing alongside Temple and five other Tigerbelles who qualified for the 1956 Olympics, was one of many included in a special project to preserve at-risk photographic collections at ten of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs]. The initiative is a joint effort by CCAHA, LYRASIS, the University of Delaware Art Department, and the HBCU Library Alliance and was funded by a \$1.2 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Like many libraries in difficult economic times, says Barbara Lemmen, a CCAHA senior photograph conservator involved in the project, the HBCU libraries are trying to preserve vast collections while performing basic library functions and dealing with changing technology and severe under-staffing. At the start of the project, many of the collections' photographs

were not in any condition to be used for exhibitions, projects, or research; many were fragile, torn, or improperly housed. Several libraries were also experiencing environmental issues, including lack of space, which meant that some photographs were stored on the floor.

And yet these photographs are of great historical importance. Many HBCUs were established to educate disenfranchised descendants of slaves—Lincoln University, for example, was established in 1866 by African-American Civil War veterans—and they continued to matriculate students throughout segregation. Alumni include congressmen, historians, artists, soldiers and athletes, many pictured in the photos.

"These collections are a source of pride," Lemmen said. "The HBCU libraries' mission is in preserving the collections, and you can see how they recognize their cultural importance."

Stabilizing at-risk items was a major goal of the 30-month project, which began in October 2007, with a two-day photo preservation summit at the University of Delaware. Several representatives from each school attended the workshops, lectures, and discussions, which were designed to provide an opportunity for sharing resources and knowledge within the HBCU network.

In November 2007, the project's second phase began with two-day collection consultations at each institution. Lemmen and Rachel Wetzel, a CCAHA photograph conservator, were two of six consultants who traveled to several universities each to meet with staff, evaluate workspace environments and identify which items were preservation priorities. Each consultation provided a basis for the preservation of the entire collection and resulted in a written recommendation for how best to spend the grant money in various areas, including treatment, re-housing, and modifications to the physical environment. Conservation students accompanied conservators on their visits, allowing them to gain invaluable first-hand experience.

"There was a teaching aspect at the beginning," Wetzel said, as one aim of the project was to provide training. Lemmen and Wetzel held workshops at the sites that they visited for library staff and student workers and volunteers. Lessons varied according to each institution's unique needs; the conservators covered surface cleaning, fabrication of custom folders and boxes, safe mold removal, and more.

Starting in May 2008, the libraries sent CCAHA items that had been identified during the on-site consultations as needing treatment and/or re-housing. Initial treatments were completed by the end of last year, but extension grants from Mellon have allowed some institutions to send additional items.

In the case of "Coach Temple and the Tigerbelles", which had overall surface dirt, brown staining and areas of flaking gelatin binder, NEA Fellow Jessica Keister completed minor treatment, and a facsimile was made. While the original photograph was housed in a corrugated paper board box for storage, the facsimile was fastened into the original frame for display. It was important to take the original off exhibit because it had been up since the 1970s, but the image, described as "an important historical item for the University" in TSU's grant proposal and the only copy they had, would have been sorely missed.

"I often heard 'our students were the first...' during my on-site visits," Lemmen said, and Wilma Rudolph is an important "first" for TSU. The facsimile will ensure that "Coach Temple and the Tigerbelles" remains a centerpiece of the library's permanent display, to be enjoyed by current and prospective students and visitors—and perhaps even by Coach Temple himself. Though technically retired, he sometimes visits his office, located in the library, so that he can take phone interviews before major track events.

—KATHERINE MAGAZINER