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Basil Griffin lake named for parks & rec pioneer

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Jesse W. Thornton Lake sugar cookies are handed out at a ceremony to recognize Warren County Parks and Recreation’s first director, on Thursday, June 22. Photo by Grace Ramey

The lake at Basil Griffin Park now has a name, ensuring that a key figure in the history of Warren County Parks & Recreation is remembered forever.

Dozens of relatives and friends of the late Jesse W. Thornton gathered by the 33-acre lake that now bears his name Thursday to honor the county's first-ever director of parks and recreation and the man who laid the groundwork for the program more than 50 years ago.

For Jesse's son Richard Thornton, the day marked the end of a two and a half year quest to have his father's work recognized.



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“It wasn't just because he was the first. He set the foundation for what we have now, which is a very successful recreation program in Warren County,” Richard said.

Jesse, a Warren County native, served as director of the department from 1968-69 and returned for a second stint from 1971-72.

“He was the catalyst with community members in Warren County and throughout the Bowling Green area,” said Chris Kummer, current director of Warren County Parks & Rec. “They wanted that quality of life that we are all blessed to have.”

Phil Moore, former parks and rec director, said it was the job of “Jess” to whip the fledgling recreation outfit into shape back in the 60s.

“We had to have somebody professional that would come in, and fortunately Jess came along,” Moore said. “He came in and rolled up his sleeves. We’re all competitive. It’s been that way since day one. He needed to come in and calm us down, organize us.”

Richard said his father’s work was instrumental in linking the county, providing places and events for locals to connect with one another.

“During those initial phases of recreation, he brought together people from different parts of Warren County,” he said. “He was bringing the county together, and that hadn’t existed before.”

Jesse eventually left the position to work in Elizabethtown, but Moore said he returned to Bowling Green “when we started slipping a little bit,” staying on until 1972. He left to work in Florida once his time in Kentucky was up.

“We miss Jess,” Moore said. Jesse Thornton passed away in 1982.

Jesse, born in 1920 as one of 10 kids, lived and breathed athletics. He was a basketball star at Woodburn High School, which led legendary Kentucky coach Adolph Rupp to recruit the young man onto his freshman squad in the early 40s.

But a pro career was not in the cards. Jesse enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and was stationed in London, where Richard was born.



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“He gave up potentially a professional ball career to fight the Germans,” Richard said.

It was his time in the armed forces that planted the seeds of Jesse’s parks and recreation career. He moved from base to base, charged with running each location’s athletic activities.

Richard said he and his sister, Diane Lewis, spent a lot of time in gyms and softball fields growing up. Lewis said her father was “teaching young British lads to throw a ball.”

Jesse retired from the service as a major.

“The fact that he was so successful moving from no stripes to retiring as a major, it was obvious that he was good at what he does,” Richard said.

His military career behind him, Jesse came back to Warren County and earned his bachelor’s and master’s at Western Kentucky University. The Fred Kirchner-Jesse W.

Thornton Scholarship is still awarded to students to this day.

Lewis said that a relative with Down syndrome inspired Jesse to advocate for those with special needs.

“When dad was in Palm Beach County, Florida, he was on the state board for the Special Olympics,” Lewis said. “The year after he died, the Boca Raton Special Olympics dedicated the games in his honor.”

Warren County Fiscal Court authorized the renaming of the lake in early May.

First District Magistrate Scott Lasley acted as a conduit of sorts to bring Thursday’s event together. He said it never hit him that the lake was without a name until Richard approached him with Jesse’s story.

“I could not think of any better way to recognize the contribution of Jesse Thornton than by naming the lake,” Lasley said. “This is really the crown jewel of Warren County.”

Lewis said she was not surprised by the crowd of people there to recognize her father.

“This family is really special. They always have been,” she said. “He brought lots of lives together, and I just feel like what he did and what our family has done is a ripple effect of service.”

