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Minnesota Crookston Hall of Famer Lloyd Mayes Blazed A Trail For Many to Follow



[FULL INTERVIEW](#)



This is part two of a two-part series. The first part can be found here - <https://goldeneaglesports.com/news/2018/7/16/mens-basketball-roots-in-nations-capital-sets-hall-of-fame-path-for-mayes.aspx?path=general>

CROOKSTON, Minn. – The civil rights movement had many trailblazers from Rosa Parks on a Montgomery, Ala., bus to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Jackie Robinson breaking the baseball color barrier. At a small college located amongst the fields of sunflowers, beans, and sugar beets of the fertile Red River Valley of the North, the path was first trudged by Lloyd Mayes, who came to Minnesota Crookston to play basketball for Head Coach Mary Bachmeier.

Mayes, a native of Washington, D.C., first came to Minnesota Crookston after he was unable to get into North Dakota State University because of grades. It wasn't always easy for Mayes being the first African-American student on a mostly white campus, but to this day he is still forever proud of his time at Minnesota Crookston.

"The education I received at Minnesota Crookston is something I cherish to this day. My experience has continued to shape my outlook on my Washington, D.C. education but once I came here I quickly figured out how suited I was for education." One pointed experience he had to showcase how suited he was for education came in the class of Larry Remele.

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"Mr. Remele asked me to write a two page paper and I can't remember what the topic was," Mayes said. "That was the first class of the year and in the second class we turned in the papers. Our third class, he handed back the papers, and told everyone you have until the next class to re-submit your paper, because the only paper in this group that is college level is Mr. Mayes' paper."

In addition to education though, Mayes wanted to make sure he had a good time along the way, as well.

"Campus life was fun," Mayes said. "In college, you have to be dedicated to athletics if you're an athlete and you also have to be dedicated to academics. But, you also have to have some fun and enjoy college life. Having fun is a big part of the relationships that you make while you're in college, and the memories that you hold onto when you are done. For me, it was a two-year experience, and I wanted to make sure I enjoyed the entire experience....athletic...academic and social."

Having fun would often come with challenges though. Mayes was told not to date because of how that might be received in the community.

"I had a high GPA, and we were winning, yet, I was told I shouldn't date because of other peoples' perceptions. It made me feel like I was less than a complete student. So, at first, I didn't date. I spent my down-time, weekends and many late nights in the gym and the library, studying," Mayes said. "I don't drink, I don't smoke and I didn't bring a bad rap to the University. Still, I wasn't supposed to enjoy a social life, like any other student. So, for me, I felt it was another form of segregation on a campus that was supposed to be inclusive and not exclusive. So I took issue with that."

Ultimately, Mayes decided to stand up for what he believed in and for what he thought was right.

"My parents always said, If you don't stand for something...You'll fall for anything," Mayes said. "If I wanted to go on a date, and someone was nice enough to say yes to that date, then I was going to go on the date. I didn't look to harm or insult anyone, but I wasn't going to be harmed or insulted, either."

There was one memory Mayes had during his time at Minnesota Crookston where he was confronted. It happened during a Sunday night at Maple Lake when he went to a dance with friends.

"A gang of bikers had a problem with me were trying to start trouble," Mayes said. "One guy approached and tried to provoke me, with all of his boys lurking in the background. I was there with four football players from New Jersey and these two sisters. I figured my safety might be in danger and I knew there was going to be a problem during or after the dance. The guys from Jersey and I squared off with the bikers and after some pushing and shoving one of the guys made a call back to campus for some reinforcements. I wasn't intimidated and I wasn't going to be. I figured, I walked onto the campus at Minnesota Crookston and I had every intention of walking off the same way. About 20 cars of reinforcements arrived from campus and while the situation came dangerously close to exploding, After that night, I realized that while some people on this campus might not have liked me, I knew a lot of them had my back if things got crazy."

Though he did run into some tough times, it was the relationships forged during his time at Minnesota Crookston that defined his collegiate experience, including that with Athletics Director Hersch Lysaker.

"My relationship with Hersch Lysaker endured the entire time I was here, and beyond that," Mayes said. "I completed my education at American University, then played basketball in Europe for years and always kept in contact with Hersch. We often saw each other and went to dinner when he visited Washington, DC."

One enduring memory Mayes had of Hersch came following an athletics banquet in which Mayes was the emcee.

"During my first year, I was the emcee for the athletic awards banquet, and I also received a lot of the awards for basketball, and track and field," Mayes said. "After the banquet though, a guy I was close to came to my room and said other athletes were talking about me because they said that I received these awards so that I would come back next year. I said, 'wait a minute, we won almost every game in basketball, we were conference champions in basketball and track and I had the highest GPA of any athlete playing two sports....I was crushed.' Because of that, I boxed up my awards and told Hersch that if I don't deserve these, then give them to someone who does."

It was later on when Mayes was at American University that he received Lysaker's response.

"He sent me all those trophies back and said 'Mayes, you have to accept the things that you earn and don't worry about the stuff people say. Take the credit for what you did.' My time at Minnesota Crookston was at times bittersweet, but in the end I was really glad I came here, and I really enjoyed my time here."

Mayes also made lasting bonds with other students at Minnesota Crookston, including with his freshman roommate Rich Wehking, who played football for the Trojans.

"My roommate my freshman year here would leave the room when I would come in," Mayes said. "Rich was a football player, and I was a basketball player. I had practice and when practice was over I would go back to my room. When I walked in, he would leave with his friends. The only time we were in the room physically for two months was when we were sleeping. One day I asked him, 'Rich, why do you always leave when I walk into the room?' The words he said were profound and I never forgot them. He said 'I didn't want to disturb you.' I responded and said. 'If you leave the room every time I walk in, we would never get to know each other. After that, we engaged and talked a lot. Sometimes, I would even talk him to sleep. We did get a chance to share what both of our lives were about."

Though Rich was not his closest friend on campus, the bond has continued to this day with Rich returning to the Minnesota Crookston campus in April of 2017 to watch Mayes give a speech to the current student-athletes.

Another close friend he made on campus was Cary Geller of Fargo, N.D, the only Jewish student on campus at the time.

"Cary came to my room when Rich was gone and said, 'I have never known a black person, and I have always been curious, but I just want to talk and learn about you. That statement is something I respected. His curiosity led to areas where we could connect. He became my closest friend, and we became inseparable. He didn't shy away from being my friend. And then there was Vinson Leslie, my roommate my second year. Vinson was Black, an ex-Marine, from South-side Chicago and, like me, from the urban inner-city. He played football and had a very outgoing personality. Vinson was and is a great friend and his friendship made our time together at UMC fun. We still communicate regularly."

Mayes made so many connections at Minnesota Crookston, from Wehking to Geller to former Trojan and NFL player Jim LeClair to former basketball player Bruce Bakke to Vinson Leslie.

"My friendships with all of those guys were worth maintaining," Mayes said. "There were so many guys who I loved up here. I had a lot of fun during my two years at Minnesota Crookston."

When it comes down to it, the story of Mayes through his time at Minnesota Crookston and into his professional career has been about learning. Whether it was picking up French, Italian, and German playing basketball overseas or constantly learning from education programming he continues to watch today. Mayes has constantly focused on learning and making his own path. He wasn't going to let any preconceived notions about who he is define him. He defined himself at Minnesota Crookston through his personality, and willingness to embrace a different setting and different people.

In the end, it all comes back to something his mom wrote in one of his autograph books when he was younger.

"Son..... love many, and trust but a few, and always paddle your own canoe."

Mayes has continued to "paddle his canoe" through life and pick up great life lessons and experiences along the way, including during his two years as the first African American to win a national title in 50 years ago. The path he first trudged set up a path for others from different backgrounds.

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