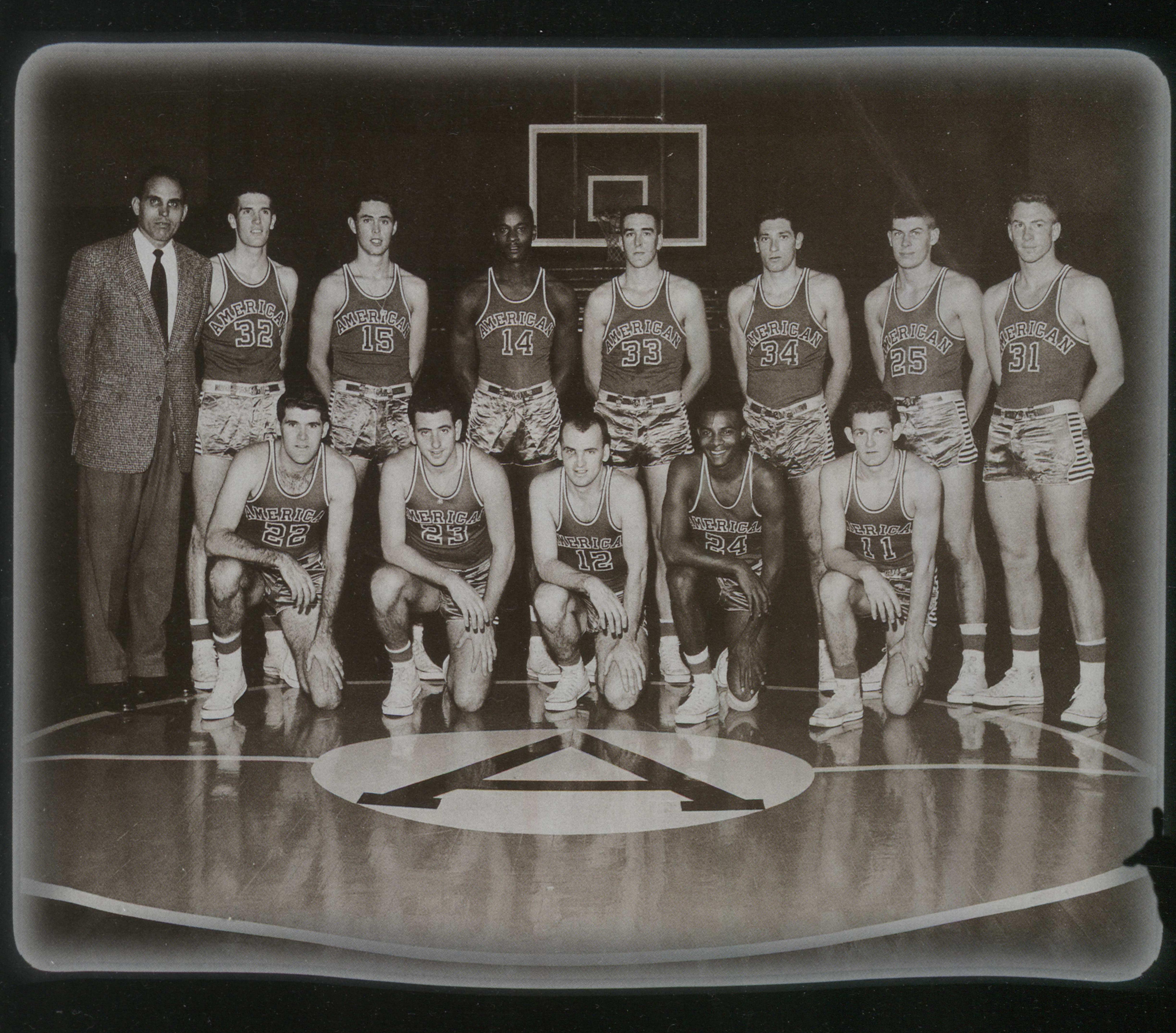
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AMERICAN LEGACIES

CHAMPIONS OF ANOTHER KIND

by Jim Edwards

the nation's capital was buzzing about American University basketball. The Eagle men were winning games, packing fans into little Leonard gym (their home court in what is now the Cassell Building), and collecting trophies behind a sharp-shooting guard who went by the name "Wee Willie."

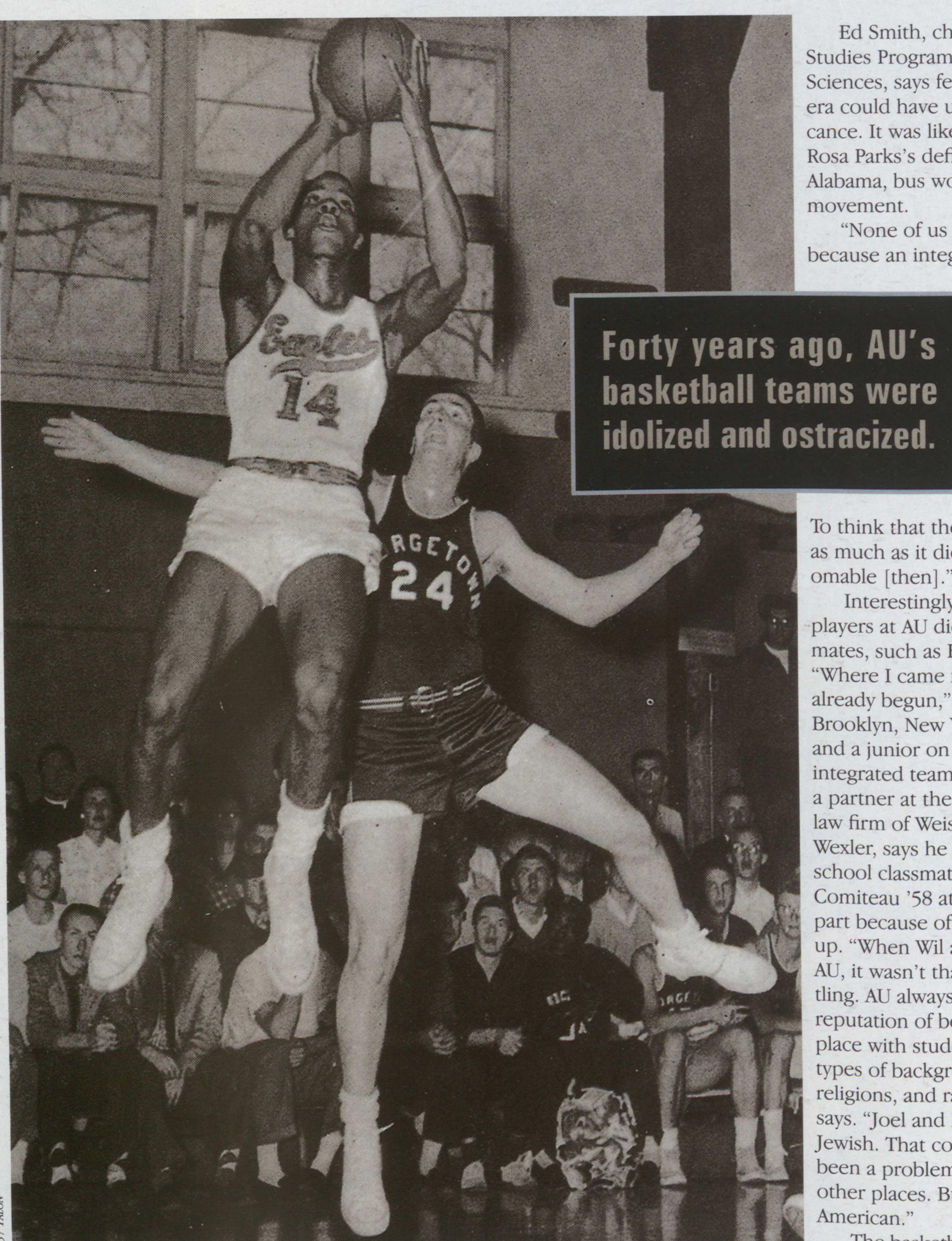
> In a three-year stretch beginning with the 1957-58 season, the Eagles won 66 games, made three trips to the NCAA college-division national tournament, and won three Mason-Dixon Conference titles.

> At the same time, these AU teams were champions in a more difficult arena: race relations. These winning teams were integrated. Long before any other major university in the nation's capital—perhaps before any other predominantly white university south of the Mason-Dixon line—AU recruited and gave athletic scholarships to African Americans.

> AU officially broke this color barrier when head coach Dave Carrasco started freshman Dick Wells '65. an African American, at center in AU's season opener at the Naval Academy on December 5, 1956. Another African American, Wil "Wee Willie" Jones '64, joined the team later that season.

> Interestingly enough, none of the black players from these integrated teams considered himself a trailblazer. "We didn't realize how important this was," says Jim "Beanie" Howell '62, the third African American to play at AU, beginning in 1958. "We were just poor city boys trying to do the best we could."





Dick Wells '65, better known for his rebounding prowess, goes up for two points during AU's 1956 homecoming game against Georgetown.

Ed Smith, chair of AU's American Studies Program, College of Arts and Sciences, says few blacks or whites of that era could have understood the significance. It was like predicting in 1955 that Rosa Parks's defiance on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus would trigger the civil rights movement.

"None of us saw the significance because an integrated society was not

> something any of us in the black community could imagine," says Smith, a D.C. native who watched the Jones-led Eagles as a teenager. "We accepted segregation as a fact of life. We took it in stride.

To think that the country would change as much as it did in the 1960s was unfathomable [then]."

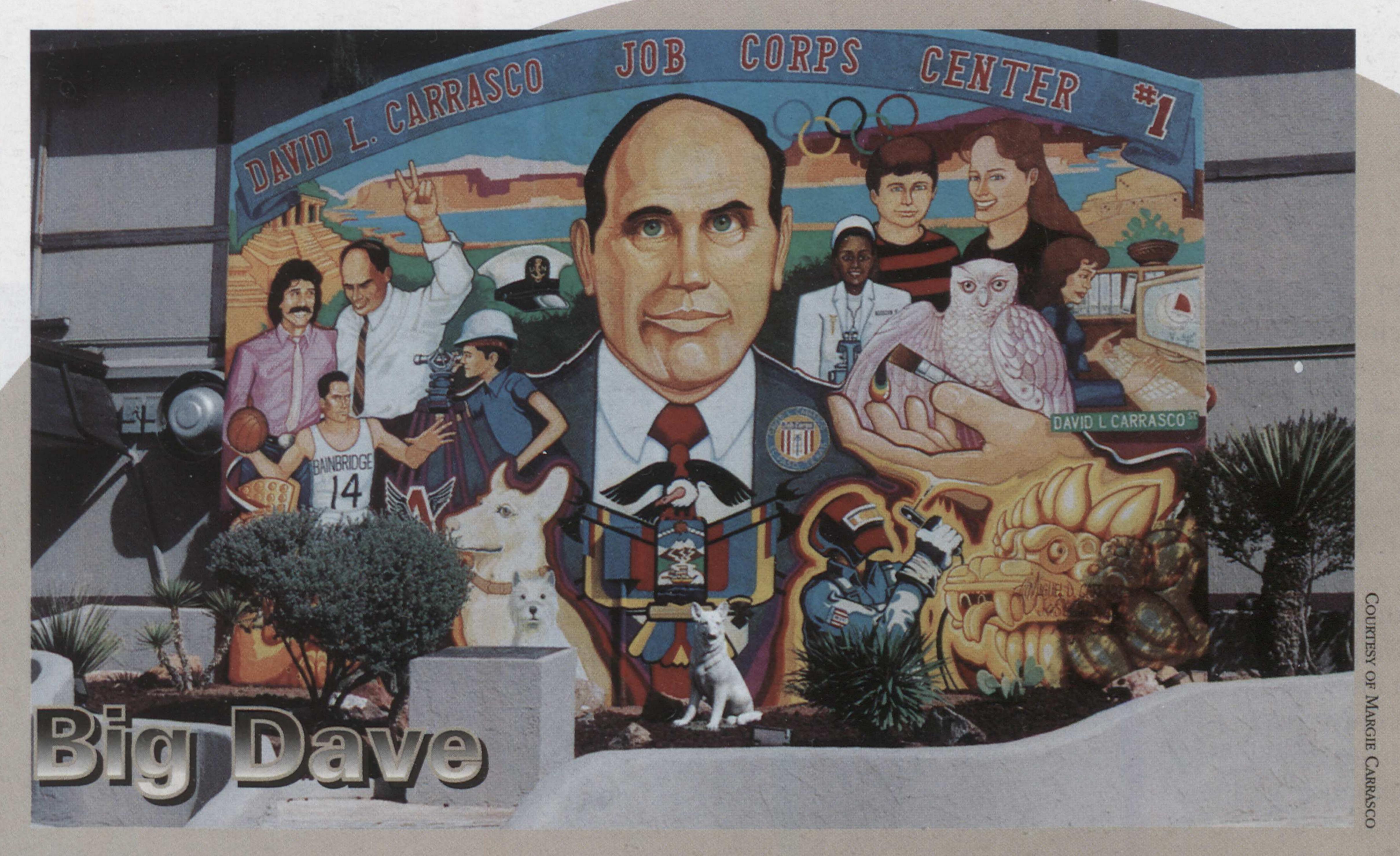
Interestingly enough, the first black players at AU didn't faze their white teammates, such as Frank Weiss '58, '61. "Where I came from, those changes had

already begun," says Weiss, a Brooklyn, New York, native and a junior on the first integrated team. Weiss, now a partner at the New York law firm of Weiss and Wexler, says he and his high school classmate Joel Comiteau '58 attended AU in part because of its diverse makeup. "When Wil and Dick came to AU, it wasn't that startling. AU always had a

reputation of being a place with students of all types of backgrounds, religions, and races," he says. "Joel and I are Jewish. That could have been a problem at some other places. But not at American."

gram was in fact carrying on what was already a university practice.

Former AU basketball coach and athletics director Dave Carrasco is prominently featured on an outdoor mural on the front of the El Paso Job Corps Center. Carrasco was the director of the center from 1970 until his



o someone driving west into El Paso on Interstate 10, the David L. Carrasco Job Corps Center looks more like a monument to the former AU basketball coach and athletics director than a training facility. Adorning the front of the building is a twostory-high mural featuring Carrasco, the center's director from 1970 until his death in 1990.

To the AU student-athletes who played for Carrasco, the mural is a fitting tribute to a man who was more than a basketball coach to them.

Carrasco came to AU from nearby Montgomery Blair High School in Maryland. There, his boys basketball teams won three state titles in four years, including Montgomery County's first, in 1952. His 1955 charges were undefeated.

His first Eagles squad went 10-14 in the 1956-57 season. Then the Eagles began their title run. "Dave was the type of individual you wanted to play for," remembers Frank Weiss '58, '61, who played under Carrasco for two years. "He was very inspiring to the players. He brought out the best in everyone."

Named the 1958 college-division national coach of the year, Carrasco's real commitment was to integration. "That's what Big Dave was all about," says his son, David Carrasco, a professor of religious history at Princeton University. "He wasn't just about winning."

The elder Carrasco championed educational opportunities for blacks and other minorities in large part due to the racism he had suffered as a Mexican American growing up in southwest Texas. "In many respects, Big Dave was treated the same way blacks were treated in the nation's capital," says his son, who watched many of AU's games then and remains in touch with many of his father's former players.

Carrasco commanded respect among his players in part because of his 6-foot-4-inch, 220-pound frame and his own athletic ability. But he was mostly admired because, as Carrasco's widow, Margie, says, "Dave never met a person he wouldn't help."

The black student-athletes, in particular, loved Carrasco. Since he was a minority himself, "we could relate to him," says Wil Jones '64.

Jones says Carrasco preached to his players the importance of education as a way of leveling society's playing field. "Coach used to say the most important thing a person has is the mind," recalls Jones.

When their playing days ended, Jones and Dick Wells '65 hadn't completed their degree requirements. They eventually did, with Carrasco's urging. The coach went so far as to help Wells get a job in AU's mailroom so Wells could afford to pay for the classes he needed to get his bachelor's degree.

After leaving AU in 1965, Carrasco dedicated himself to helping the underprivileged, primarily as the director of the El Paso Job Corps Center. He compiled an enviable record there as well. In 1988, Time magazine featured Carrasco because of the center's success: it had ranked number one among the nation's 107 Job Corps units for the 10th straight year.

Carrasco died in 1990. But his memory lives on in the lives of his players and in the ideals he sought to impart. Says Carrasco's assistant coach, Jim Williams '56, "Dave saw no color."

In 1914, for instance, AU announced its first fellowship recipients, one of whom was John Bowen Jr., an African American. In 1936—nearly 30 years before Governor George Wallace of Alabama tried to stop the National Guard from integrating his state university—AU's Graduate Board voted unanimously to admit the first African American, Thelma Ackiss, to the university's downtown graduate school.

While blacks hadn't played basketball at AU before 1956, Hugo "Dutch" Schultz '41, the program's coach from 1952 until 1956 and the man who gave the athletic scholarships to Wells and Jones, confirms that minorities were always welcome. "We had no color code," says Schultz, now retired and living in Fayetteville, Pennsylvania.

AU's attitude toward integration contrasted sharply with that of much of

the country. On the road, fans often harassed AU's black players with racial slurs. During warmups before a game in Roanoke, Jones says he was greeted with a chorus of "Bye, Bye Black Bird."

AU ran into other problems. Jim Williams '56, an assistant coach from 1957 until he was named head coach in 1962, remembers the difficulty of finding a gas station on Virginia's Route 1 that would service the racially mixed team bus. After a game in Baltimore, the AU team searched several blocks to find a restau-

"None of us saw the significance of these teams because an integrated society was not something any of us in the black community could imagine." AU Professor Ed Smith

rant that served blacks. At the 1958 national championships, AU stayed on the outskirts of Evansville, Indiana, because of the whites-only policy at the downtown hotels.

Whenever AU spent the night on the road, Wells says he and his teammates rarely left their hotel rooms. "We were never in any town long enough to know what side of the tracks we were on," he explains.

The all-white Mason-Dixon Conference objected to AU's practice of recruiting minority studentathletes, which accelerated under Carrasco (named coach in October 1956 after Schultz resigned) and Williams. "Half the Mason-Dixon Conference didn't want to play AU. Other teams had no problem coming to Washington to play us, but they didn't want us to go to their place," recalls Williams, now retired and living in Bloomington, Indiana. "They said they were concerned because they didn't know what might happen."

Adds Williams, "We had trouble scheduling enough games to qualify for the conference tournament."

With its newly attained

reputation as a first-rate team, AU tried to schedule matchups with higher-profile schools, such as Maryland and George Washington. But there was no interest. Says team manager David Shaheen '63, now an Episcopal priest living near Philadelphia, "We called Maryland and George Washington, but they never seemed to have room on their schedules. It didn't matter how early we called," he remembers. "They never came out and said it, but we knew what was going on. Nobody wanted to touch us."

Despite the opposition by league coaches and athletic directors, Carrasco, also AU's athletics director, stood his ground. "We had some unbelievable meetings with the conference. But I never saw Dave back down from these [race] issues," says Williams. "That was the way Dave was when it came to his principles." (For more on Carrasco, see story on page 13.)

The university administration stood behind Carrasco and, later, his decision to upgrade AU's athletics program from college to university status, according to Williams. "[AU President Hurst Anderson] supported what Dave was doing," says Williams. "Dr. Anderson told Dave, 'If you think you can get this done, then do it."

Carrasco did his best to minimize his players' exposure to the attitudes around them. For instance, he never told the team about his dispute with the league. He never told the players about the phone calls his staff made prior to a road trip to identify hotels that accommodated blacks. He didn't explain why the players sometimes ate their meals in their cars rather than in restaurants. "The coaching staff knew where the trouble was," reflects Wells, "and we avoided it."

To make all of his players more comfortable in often inhospitable environments, Carrasco nurtured a family atmosphere around his program. As a result, the Eagles displayed a unique chemistry on and off the court. "We always did things as a team, totally," says Jones. "When we sat in a restaurant and the waiter said he couldn't serve Dick and me, we all got up. And nobody said anything."

Those bonds have left these men with their best memories. "Those were good times," says Jones smiling. "I had a ball. We all did."

