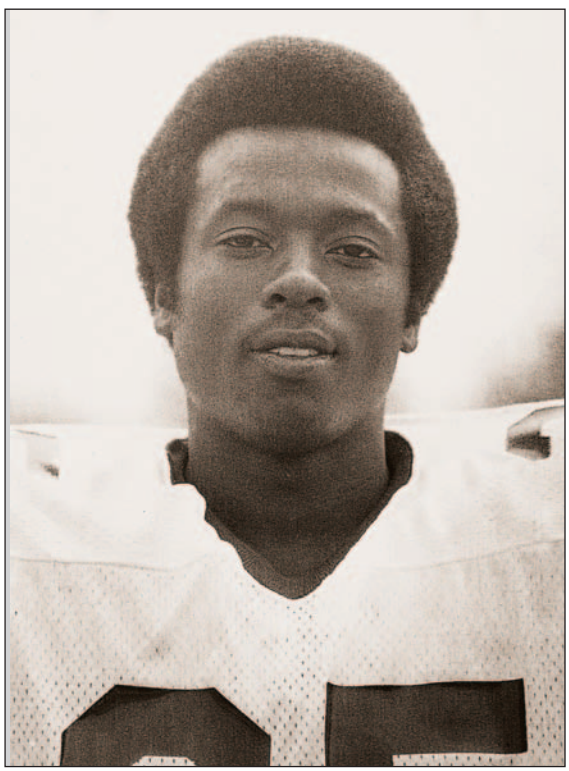
NATE RUFFIN

A TRUE SON OF MARSHALL

by charles bowen



Nate Ruffin is a storyteller. Names and faces, funny comments and poignant episodes fill his conversation as naturally as the breath between his sentences.

His love for people – his ceaseless fascination with what they do and why – has defined his life.

Talk to him for just five minutes and you can hear him searching his memory for names of people the two of you might have in common. This politician. That football player. Maybe a teacher or a minister, a newspaper reporter or perhaps just a colorful local character who made you both smile one time. It's likely there will be at least somebody, because Ruffin also has devoted a large part of his 50 years to keeping tabs on old friends all around the country.

Old friends…and their stories.

Nate Ruffin understands the power of a story. That's because there's one with which he is most frequently associated – a tragic, well-known story that once sent him spiraling into despair, but also ultimately strengthened him and gave his life purpose.

It's the story from which Huntington and Marshall University will never be separated. To this day, more than

(Above) Nate Ruffin was one of only a handful of Marshall football players who missed the fatal plane trip to East Carolina in November 1970 because of an injury. The following year, he was known by teammates as the "Old Man" when he suited up in the fall and took the field with the Young Thundering Herd. (Opposite) Today Ruffin is a successful executive at the Freedom Forum, a non-profit foundation dedicated to free press, headquartered in Arlington, Virginia.

30 years later, there are still people who ask him, "Aren't you the one who missed the plane crash?"

Nate Ruffin has told the story over and over again, how he was in a movie theater in downtown Huntington the night of Nov. 14, 1970. The 20-year-old defensive back with the Thundering Herd had injured his arm two weeks earlier and was unable to make the fatal trip to Greenville, N.C., for the football game that Saturday.

He has told how he and fellow player Dickie Carter rushed to that muddy hillside near Tri-State Airport and stood before the horrendous fire that lit up the cold, dark woods. It was the burning wreckage of the Southern Airways DC-9, where 75 people, including 38 of his teammates, perished in an instant.

And he has often told how he returned to Marshall's campus that night to help with the telephone calls. He jumped from phone to phone at the emergency center set up in a gymnasium, for it was Nate, a co-captain on the ill-fated team, whom these grieving parents in 18 different states knew. It was Nate they wanted to hear.

The story that Ruffin didn't always tell is what happened after that.

In the years after the crash, he drifted. Disappointed in his athletic career – a tryout with the Dallas Cowboys failed because they found his arm too damaged from his college football years – he even descended for a while into the drug scene.

And there was the guilt. Irrational, but ever-present was his remorse for being spared when his comrades were not, feelings that could be awakened anew by a stranger's casual question. "Aren't you...?"

So it was a story with which Nate Ruffin had to make peace.

Instead of running from it, he finally decided to turn and stand and tell it. It was both a living memorial to his friends and a kind of catharsis for himself, a purging of self-pity.

The telling of it for the past three decades changed Nate Ruffin's life, and the lives of many people he has met in an assortment of jobs.

Fresh from Marshall's graduate school in 1978, Ruffin applied for work at Huntington's ACF Industries Inc. The man doing the interviews recognized him from the newspapers' stories about the aftermath of the crash. Giving Nate a second look because of that familiarity, the interviewer was struck by Ruffin's infectious laugh and engaging personality. He brought Nate on board as personnel administrator, a "people-person" position that he would hold for the next seven years. After that, Ruffin moved to the Huntington Publishing Co., again as personnel director for the two newspapers, where he would serve for six years.

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Along the way, new missions came into his life. At both companies, he was the first African-American in a management position, presenting him with enormous opportunities to improve human relations on a very personal level.

"People who ordinarily would have been stand-offish toward a black man," Ruffin recalls, "opened up to me. I think they felt they already knew me, because we'd gone through the same tragedy."

And it wasn't just at work. Ruffin became increasingly involved in the Huntington community. He served on boards of all kinds from the NAACP to the Marshall University Institutional Board of Advisors, from the alumni association to the board of deacons of the Antioch Baptist Church.

He also touched lives far removed from such circles of influence. Like one autumn afternoon in 1987 in a little gymnasium in Lincoln County, W.Va.

Ruffin has always been at his best when it's one-to-one. Nate, thinking on his feet, as always, realized a connection between himself and several dozen high school students. He had been invited to give the usual speech at the school's "Impact" program, but it was just the usual question the students wanted answered. "Aren't you the one who ...?" Suddenly, as he looked out on that sea of young, white faces, Nate was struck by the irony of it.

"I was once just like you sitting in here today," he heard himself saying.

It was true. Having grown up in Quincy, Fla., Nate had attended an all-black school, just as they now attended all-white Duval High School in Griffithsville. He understood their lack of exposure to other races.

But the problem, he said, was bigger than race. Had they ever considered that if they moved to bigger cities outside West Virginia, they were likely to experience discrimination themselves, because of their Appalachian background? There was a powerful lesson in that.

"You should be proud of who you are, but remember, some opinions you formed early in your life have to be changed through education."

That philosophy of growth through education is still central to Ruffin today.

(Right) Nate Ruffin, a longtime supporter of the football program, was on campus in November to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Marshall University plane

That philosophy of growth through education is still central to Ruffin today. He has carried it with him to new towns and new jobs.

In 1991, he and his wife, Sharon, and their three children moved to Jackson, Miss. It was another personnel director's position, this time with The *Clarion-Ledger* newspaper.

More recently, he became vice president of human resources for the Freedom Forum, a nonprofit foundation devoted to free press headquartered in Arlington, Va., where he now lives with his family. At the foundation, created by newspapering giant Al Neuharth, he has worked on projects such as supplemental education programs for minority journalism students, serving with fellow Marshall graduate Pam Galloway.

But Nate Ruffin hasn't stopped telling the story that is the subtext of his life. He established a scholarship honoring those who died in the crash. More recently, he worked with filmmakers and writers who were documenting the tragedy on its 30th anniversary for the Public Broadcasting System, Home Box Office and others.

That experience brought back even more memories for him. He was reminded, for instance, of what his young teammates nicknamed him on that modest, first Thundering Herd team immediately following the crash, "The Old Man," they called him.

"Well," he says now, "The Old Man can use some help telling the story these days. So when I run out of breath, I can just hand them one of these tapes." Then, after that familiar laugh subsides, he adds quietly, "I just don't want anyone to ever forget."

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