



prologue.

Mel Tolson had a story to tell, but persuading him to tell it was another matter entirely.

The Mel Tolson Jr. story was a natural for *Sooner Magazine*. The first full-time African American faculty member at the University of Oklahoma and the first to become a full professor. An internationally known scholar and award-winning teacher of French language and literature. A man who had lived the turmoil of integration on the OU campus. But what should have been a slam dunk became more of a marathon.

Time after time he was approached for an interview, even after he retired in 1990, and time after time he declined. It was nothing personal; he was always gracious, but still, “No. I’d rather not.”

His name remained on the prospect list, and every so often, we asked again. Then in 2008, he said, “Yes”—perhaps because he was asked to talk about his father.

More than 40 years after his death, Melvin Tolson Sr. had just been featured in the Denzel Washington movie, *The Great Debaters*, a fictionalized version of the 1935 national triumph of tiny, all-black Wiley College’s debate team over the all-white team from the University of Southern California. Tolson Sr. had been their coach and went on to become a celebrated poet, academic super star and political activist.

That the son would be more willing to discuss his father than himself was no surprise to his friends and colleagues. That was Mel Tolson—gentle, modest, generous, good friend and trusted confidant. Gradually, as he talked to writer Kathryn Jensen White, his own story emerged.

His manner might have been unassuming, but it did not mask completely the strength of character that had seen him successfully through the sternest of tests. Born in 1923 into a robust, intellectually argumentative family, Tolson learned early to take a position and be able to defend it. He

discovered a love of language matched only by his love of music.

He was expected to pursue his education to the Ph.D. level, and he did not disappoint. With three other young



Mel Tolson Jr.

African American men, he enrolled for his master’s at Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State) in 1949. The atmosphere was toxic, and only two finished the course, Tolson being the first of his race to earn the degree there—by virtue of crossing the stage first, he would later joke.

In 1957, he arrived at OU as a doctoral student, a brilliant one by all accounts. Two years later he was the unanimous choice of the modern languages faculty to fill a full-time vacancy.

It was a turbulent time on the campus. The few African American students at OU needed all the moral support they could find—and they found plenty in Tolson, especially after he was joined on the faculty in 1967 by the gregari-

ous George Henderson, the two forming a perfectly complementary, life-long friendship. With Lennie Marie Muse-Toliver, they helped students establish the Afro-American Student Union, now called the Black Student Association. In 2002, the University completely renovated the former Stovall Museum into a home for black student organizations and activities and named it the Henderson-Tolson Cultural Center.

In the classroom, Tolson was a superb teacher. He pioneered the study of Caribbean and African writers in the French language, organizing the first Francophone Literature Symposium in 1975. He won the Regents Award for Superior Teaching in 1967. Even after his retirement, he remained involved in the modern languages department, teaching occasionally, always interested in the students.

Delightfully for the past few years, Tolson also remained connected to *Sooner Magazine* in a small way. Periodically requests came from former students seeking his contact information, which required a call for permission. He was always amenable and would linger on the phone just to talk about those students. An alumni group at a college where he once taught wanted to honor him at its reunion, and while his health prevented him from attending, he was pleased that he was still remembered there.

He had been able to attend a dinner and special screening of *The Great Debaters* in 2007. Among the other attendees were faculty members of the African American Studies Program, the outgrowth of seeds planted so long ago when Tolson’s arrival at OU set the standard for subsequent generations.

On July 31, 2011, Melvin B. Tolson Jr. died at the age of 88 after a lengthy illness. It shocked no one who knew him that, at his request, no services were planned. —CJB