

# WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

*A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.*

## Greg Bell

Olympic Games historian Lewis H. Carlson labeled Vigo County native Gregory Bell “a Renaissance man...much more than a gold medal-winning long jumper.

“Above all,” Carlson concluded, “Greg Bell is a student of the human condition.” As an Indiana University sophomore, Bell catapulted from humble origins to national fame when he won the Olympic gold at Melbourne in 1956. He has carried that success through his life, his career as a dentist, his sculpting and his poetry. *Nuggets*, his latest anthology of poems, was published in 1997.

Residing in Logansport with wife Mary Louise, Bell continues to fulfill a mission by employing his life’s experiences to motivate others. “It matters not from where you come,” the Pimento and Garfield High School alumnus asserts.

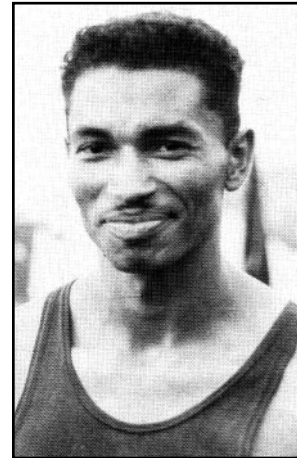
Bell was born in 1930 in the Linton Township home built by his father, a descendant of North Carolina slaves. The house burned when Greg was an infant, forcing the large family to live in a chicken coop until the Vigo War Ordnance depot acquired the land in 1942. Meanwhile, Curt and Essa Bell’s children attended Pimento School, where Greg nourished his competitive zeal.

As a Garfield sophomore in 1946, Bell sprinted, high jumped and pole vaulted. While recuperating from an injury, he followed principal Jim Conover’s suggestion to try the broad jump. Though unbeaten under Coach George Yaeger until a second-place finish in the 1948 IHSAA Finals, Bell worked at odd jobs after graduation until the draft beckoned. During a 23-month stint in the service, he became European Armed Forces long-jump champion at Nuremberg, Germany, leaping 15 inches farther than his schoolboy best.

Even after setting a new Indiana AAU record in 1954 by leaping over 24 feet, Bell seemed destined to labor at the local Allis-Chalmers plant. During Bell’s bout with tonsillitis, Dr. William G. Bannon made a house call that would change his patient’s future. After inspecting trophies on the Bells’ mantle, the doctor admonished Bell for not utilizing his talent in college. With encouragement from Bannon, Bell enrolled at Indiana University. While attending IU, he established an NCAA long-jump standard (26’ 7”), earned multiple Big Ten and NCAA titles, and was awarded the coveted Conference Medal of Honor for proficiency in scholarship and athletics in 1958.

Inducted in the National and Indiana Track & Field halls of fame and the IU Athletic Hall of Fame, Bell, now 67, remains dedicated to improving the world around him through education.

He and his family — including his sister and brother-in-law, Joellen and Leon McKnight of Terre Haute, and stepbrother Stuart Bradshaw of Chicago — have been central to the renovation of Pimento School. Since Bell was featured at a benefit dinner-auction last June, a study has been conducted to determine the feasibility of converting the 1925 structure into a community center, complete with elevators and handicap accessibility. The estimate is \$319,000 and fundraising efforts are continuing. Inmates from Carlisle Correctional Facility have donated six weeks of labor to ready the school for remodeling.



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