

**“Remembering”
with Ryan Wilensky**

Without the West End House Camp, “I guarantee I wouldn’t be the person I am today.” Reginald “Reggie” Bird grew up on North Anderson Street, which is now the parking lot of Mass General Hospital and was only one block from the West End House Club on Blossom Street. His uncle, Frank Gropman, a long time West Ender and WEH camper, took Reggie to the club when he was only 6 and introduced him to basketball for the first time. In 1960, at the age of 10, he was eligible to go to the West End House Camp for 2 weeks for the price of \$10. This included the physical and the Greyhound bus to Maine. Along with his crew of friends, the West End kids could only attend camp for the first 2 weeks. This explains why West End’s greatest Basketball player ever was never a High Senior Captain. He was never at camp for Color War as a camper.

Reggie was a 5 year camper and an 8 year counselor. The suburban kids sent their laundry home in a laundry box; Reggie did his on the “Wash Rock.” He still seems annoyed that as a 10 year old he was forced to participate in mandatory skinny dipping in the morning. This was a tradition that is thankfully long gone. The Director at the time, Allie Coles, demanded it, despite Reggie’s attempts to hide. Reggie was initially very homesick. In the middle of the night if he had to go to the bathroom, he had to walk from the old Gottlieb, with no bathroom, to 2A for relief. A lot of things have changed for the better at camp!

Other than Basketball, Wiffleball in the Council Ring and Watermelon League were his favorite sports. “I enjoyed it all.” He loved hiking, waterskiing, canoeing, and swimming. Allie Coles let him stay 2 more weeks one year, so he met lifelong friends, Bobby Gordon, Keith Sherman, Steve Brown, and Marty Jacobs.

His favorite memory was when he was 11 or 12 years old during waterskiing. He was going around fast, water splashing on his face. “One of the skis fell off. I kept my balance with 1 ski and made it back to the H-Dock. I don’t know how that happened.”

Reggie did not favor the highly acclaimed “Tuna Fish Fridays,” but he did love the french fries. He would eat a bowl of them and run back to the kitchen to get more before they ran out. He loved “cake and milk,” but found it odd that it was served near the pump station. “If the pump station had a bad day, it would smell awful down there.”

Reggie finally got his chance to participate in Color War as a CIT when he coached the White Spartans. That year he remembers there were busses that arrived to take the campers to a dance. Instead, they were taken to the sand pit near Kennards and Color War began. Reggie was the Head Coach of the Blue Archers as well. He was thrilled to have beaten his fellow friend from the old West End, Ron Cancelieri. The Color War started out rough, with the Archers losing almost every point on day 1. In an effort to motivate the Archers, the coaches told the campers to pretend Color War actually started on day 2. It seemed to work and the Archers prevailed.

As a counselor, Reggie remembers the Kezar Laundromat and the Bowling Alley when they were both new. During time off, they used to go to “Dahl’s” diner in Cornish and eat clam strips which were like chewing elastics; the servers there were less than cordial. He used to drive to Old Orchard Beach and Portland for nights out.

With a name like “Reggie Bird,” he just had to be great at Basketball. He went to high school at Boston English, having transferred from Boston Latin. As Boston’s original Basketball “Bird,” Reggie and English won the 1968 Tech Tournament (Eastern Mass champs) and the state tournament. With the fans chanting, “What’s the Word? REGGIE BIRD,” English defeated huge juggernaut schools like Cambridge

Rindge & Latin and New Bedford. In fact, I asked my father, who graduated English High 5 years before Reggie, "Dad, have you heard of Reggie Bird?" My father's response, "What's the word, Reggie Bird? Of course." Reggie was not just a camp legend. After graduating, he decided to play for Ivy League powerhouse Princeton, under future Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame coach, Pete Carril.

How was Reggie able to be a counselor for 8 years and be a bigtime Division 1 basketball player for the Princeton Tigers? Turns out back then his college basketball commitment was only for the few months of the winter season. There were no offseason demands at all. Reggie played with Geoff Petrie, who would become General Manager of the great Sacramento Kings teams of the early 2000's (players Chris Webber, Vlade Divac, Mike Bibby). Petrie brought back their old Princeton coach Pete Carril as an assistant. Reggie seemed to find it funny that Coach Carril became famous for the "Princeton Offense." "We played 75% of practice on defense." With Reggie, Princeton beat North Carolina (Ranked #2 at the time) and their stars Bob McAdoo and George Karl in 1972. In the 1972 NIT, at Madison Square Garden, his team also took down a very tough Indiana team coached by Bobby Knight before eventually losing to Niagara. Other great players he went up against included Rudy Tomjanovich of Michigan, Henry Bibby and Sidney Wicks of UCLA, and Larry Finch of Memphis.

With respect to Hoops greats like Norty Miller, Charlie Hennekens, Dean Goldberg, Kevin Mahoney, Jared Klapman and more recent stars like Sam Shapiro and Mark Karmiy, there is no doubt who is the most accomplished West End basketball player ever. After Reggie graduated from Princeton in 1972, he was drafted into the NBA by the Atlanta Hawks in the 4th round with the 55th overall pick in the draft, 42 spots after Dr. J (www.basketball-reference.com/draft/NBA_1972.html). He was also selected in the newly formed ABA for the Virginia Squires (www.apbr.org/abadrafts.html). During that spring, Reggie was playing softball at Princeton, slid into home plate awkwardly, and broke his ankle. He saw the Red Sox team doctor and had surgery. Reggie was in the hospital when he found out he was drafted and "forgot" to tell the team that selected him about the injury. That summer he went back to West End for his last year to get back into shape, running miles on the roads. He signed with the Squires, but his ankle never improved. He showed up to rookie and veteran camps, then went back home to rehab at Harvard. The next summer an agent was recruiting a U.S traveling team to play in Italy. For 5 months, Reggie played all over Italy. By then the Virginia Squires went out of business.

Reggie Bird decided to go into teaching. Like being a counselor at camp, he liked working with children. He also wanted to treat people fairly, "like I wanted to be treated." He enjoyed trying to get kids to work together and appreciated their interests. He then went on to become a Guidance Counselor and Principal at a boarding school called Florida Air Academy.

It had been difficult for Reggie to attend Old Timers' Week until his retirement. "Marty (Jacobs) called for 30 years. Every year OTW was the same weekend my boarding school started." Recently he has been able to attend and loves seeing good friends like "Marty, Dave Bikofsky, Kappy, Nason, Ralph, Tony, and many others." "To me, they are as I remember them 50 years ago."

Reggie now resides in Palm Bay, Florida. He describes West End House Camp as a "life altering experience all these years." He treasures the friendships he has made over the last 60 years. "Those guys mean a lot to me both as individuals and as a group. They subscribe to the "Spirit of the House". It is still important to them. It's a unique group of people with one thing in common, their experiences with the West End House Camp." He grew up close to the club on Blossom Street in the original West End. The "Original Birdman," Reggie Bird, won a state championship in the Boston Garden down the street, long before some kid from French Lick, Indiana with a similar name, ever came to town. Thank you, Reggie Bird for "Remembering" with me. When it comes to the King of the Rec Hall, Reggie Bird soars alone. WHAT'S THE WORD again?