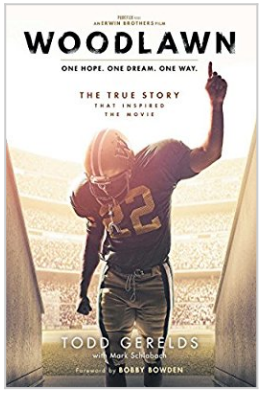

Woodlawn: One Hope. One Dream. One Way.

By Todd Gerelds

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This riveting true story of courage, strength, and football at the height of racial tension in Birmingham, Alabama, inspired the motion picture *Woodlawn*, and tells the story of Coach Tandy Gerelds, his running back Tony Nathan, and a high school football game that healed a city.

Woodlawn is soon to be a major motion picture starring Jon Voight, Nic Bishop, and C. Thomas Howell.

In the midst of violent, impassioned racial tensions in Birmingham, Alabama, new football coach, Tandy Gerelds, was struggling to create a winning football team at Woodlawn High School—one of the last schools in Birmingham to integrate. The team he was handed did not have the caliber of players he needed to win—until he saw Tony Nathan run.

But Tony was African American and Coach Gerelds knew that putting him in as running back would be like drawing a target on his own back and the back of his soon-to-be star player. But Coach Gerelds saw something in Tony, and he knew that his decision to let him play was about more than football. It was about doing what was right for the school…and the city.

And soon, the only place in the city where blacks and whites got along was on Coach Gerelds's football team. With the help of a new school chaplain, Tony learned to look beyond himself and realized that there was more at stake than winning a game.

In 1974, Coach Gerelds's interracial team made Alabama history drawing 42,000 fans into the stadium to watch them play. It was this game that triggered the unity and support of the Woodlawn High School Colonels and that finally allowed a city to heal and taught its citizens how to love.

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Woodlawn: One Hope. One Dream. One Way. By Todd Gerelds Bibliography

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Todd Gerelds, son of Legendary Alabama high school coach Tandy Gerelds, witnessed God's transforming grace at Woodlawn and throughout his dad's life. Todd is honored to tell the amazing story of redemption that happened at Woodlawn and changed countless lives forever. Tandy Gerelds's career spanned four decades and also included coaching stints at Shoals Christian School (AL), Belmont High School (MS), and Deshler High School where Todd played for his father, and where Coach Gerelds won the Alabama State Championship in 1990. His Deshler team broke the all-time scoring record at that time (603 points) and had a twenty-eight game winning streak. Todd, his wife, and four daughters live in Birmingham, Alabama.

Woodlawn

CHAPTER ONE

BOMBINGHAM

Just twelve years before the eventful football game at Legion Field in 1974, no one was cheering for two integrated football teams—and certainly not at Woodlawn High. But on the morning of September 2, 1965, six students quietly enrolled for the first day of classes at Woodlawn High School. They were the first African Americans to ever attend classes at the historically lily-white school, which was among the last of the city's public schools to integrate blacks into its student body.

Among these students was a teenager named Cynthia Holder and her two cousins and their three neighbors. Cynthia, who was fifteen years old at the time, was about to begin her junior year, after spending the previous two school years at Phillips High School. At the beginning of the summer, her cousin and best friend, Rita Eileen King, told Cynthia that she and her brother Cedric were going to integrate Woodlawn High, along with three other students from their church—Myrtice Chamblin, Lily Humphries, and Leon Humphries.

"Rita and I grew up like sisters and were very close," said Holder, who is now Cynthia Holder Davis Thompson and lives in Birmingham. "The other kids and their pastor decided they wanted to integrate Woodlawn High School. Whatever Rita wanted to do, I was going to be a part of."

Jesse Dansby, the pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Birmingham, spent the next few months preparing the six teenagers for what they might face at Woodlawn High. He gave them Scripture to read, including Psalm 37:1–9, which Cynthia read from her Bible every morning for strength:

Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.

Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this:

He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.

Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.

For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

“He gave the Scripture to us to get our minds right and to prepare for what we were going to face,” Holder said. “We had to be groomed to go. I think Reverend Dansby and our parents did a good job of letting us know what to expect and how to act.”

She and the other African American students were aware they wouldn’t be warmly greeted at their new school. Woodlawn High School was established in 1916 to educate the children of the white sales managers, engineers, and other executives who lived in the attractive Craftsman bungalows and Tudor Revival cottages in the booming Woodlawn Highlands neighborhood of East Birmingham.

The Woodlawn High School building, which was designed by architect Harry B. Wheelock and completed in January 1922, was more of a cathedral than a schoolhouse. The three-story brick building looked like a castle, complete with towers, Gothic arches, and tall spires shooting straight into the sky. The school’s finely detailed auditorium even included a balcony. From 1934 to 1939, Sidney van Sheck and Richard Blauvelt Coe painted a large mural—seventy feet wide by eight feet tall—on the proscenium arch of the auditorium for the Works Progress Administration. The mural’s inscription read: “Gloried Be They Who Foresaking Unjust Riches Strive in Fulfillment of Humble Tasks for Peace Culture and the Equality of All Mankind.”

However, there was nothing equal about Woodlawn High School. For nearly a half century, its doors were closed to African American students in America’s most divided city. There were five all-white high schools in Birmingham—Ensley, Phillips, Ramsay, West End, and Woodlawn. Until 1963, no black student had ever attended classes at any of the high schools.

There were three high schools for black students in Birmingham: Hayes, Parker, and Ullman. Parker High opened as the Negro High School in 1900, and after it was renamed in honor of its first principal, A. H. Parker, in 1946, it had an enrollment of 3,761 students, making it the country’s largest all-black school. As the threat of federal desegregation loomed, Birmingham officials expanded Ullman High with a new three-story classroom wing in 1957, and then the new all-black Hayes High School opened on a seventeen-acre campus in 1960.

Not even federal court orders could break racial barriers in Alabama. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the separate but equal doctrine in American public schools in its historic Brown v. Board of Education decision. In an eleven-page opinion written by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the court firmly ruled: “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

But the Brown v. Board of Education decision fell on mostly deaf ears in Alabama, where segregation and Jim Crow laws were deeply embedded in the state’s thick, red clay. In the 1950s, African Americans in Birmingham were still required to ride in the back of city buses, drink from “colored” water fountains, and

use separate restrooms. Blacks weren't allowed to eat at downtown lunch counters and restaurants, and there were segregated movie theaters, department stores, parks, and swimming pools. Black high school football teams couldn't play at Legion Field, the "Old Gray Lady," which hosted University of Alabama games and was considered the football capital of the South.

Although 40 percent of Birmingham's population of nearly 350,000 residents in 1950 was black, the city had no African American police officers, firefighters, or elected officials. Only whites were hired as bus drivers, bank tellers, sales clerks, and cashiers in department stores. Black secretaries couldn't work for white businessmen, and white nurses weren't permitted to care for black patients, and vice versa. Even prison chain gangs were segregated—white inmates couldn't be shackled to black prisoners.

Seven years after Jackie Robinson famously broke Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1947, and long after public schools in other regions of the country started opening their doors to black students, Birmingham was determined to keep its draconian Jim Crow laws intact no matter the cost. There were even city ordinances in place that made it unlawful for a "Negro and a white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, baseball, softball, football, basketball or similar games." If blacks and whites couldn't play together, they certainly weren't allowed to learn together.

In 1969, African American Julius Clark was hired as an industrial arts teacher and boys' advisor at Woodlawn High. He had grown up in the Collegeville neighborhood in North Birmingham, one of the few areas reserved for black residents under the city's strict segregation laws. Clark attended all-black schools and his only interaction with white people occurred on the weekends or during the summers, when he went to nearby all-white neighborhoods to find domestic work. Clark spent many mornings cutting grass, raking leaves, and polishing floors for white families. He usually earned one dollar for four hours of work, which was enough money to pay for admission and concessions at an all-black movie theater. White women often gave him a sandwich and bottle of Coca-Cola for lunch.

"I rode behind the colored sign on the bus. I drank from the colored water fountain," Clark said. "I stepped off the sidewalk and onto the curb when the white ladies walked by. When I was old enough to register to vote, I paid the three-dollar poll tax and answered the crazy quizzes those people came up with. I followed the rules and regulations of the system."

The civil rights struggle occurred in two waves in Birmingham and each was met with much resistance and violence. After the Brown v. Board of Education decision, it took civil rights activists three long, conflict-ridden years to challenge Birmingham's segregation laws in schools. On August 20, 1957, Arthur Shores, one of the first and most successful African American attorneys in Alabama, petitioned the Birmingham Board of Education to admit thirteen black children from nine families to schools closest to their homes—all-white Graymont Elementary, Phillips High, and Woodlawn High. Shores, who attended segregated schools in Alabama as a child and then law school at the University of Kansas, became a civil rights pioneer after winning high-profile cases that had never before been litigated by black attorneys in the Deep South.

Despite Shores's growing reputation and successes, three African American families dropped their requests for transfers because of threats of violence. White supremacists weren't going to lie down. On Labor Day 1957, a group of Ku Klux Klansmen kidnapped a randomly chosen African American man while he was walking down a Birmingham road with his girlfriend. The six men took the mildly mentally disabled black man, J. Edward "Judge" Aaron, back to their Klan lair, where they beat and interrogated him. When the men were finished, they asked Aaron if he wanted to die or be castrated. Aaron chose to live, so the men mutilated him and left him in a creek bed, where he nearly bled to death before police found him. According

to police, the men told Aaron it would happen to “any Negro sending his child to a white school.” Birmingham police later arrested the suspects and charged them with mayhem. Two of the men turned state’s witnesses, and the other four were convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison. They were later pardoned by Alabama Governor George C. Wallace.

During a Birmingham Board of Education meeting that was attended by three Klansmen, the board tabled Shores’s request to allow African American children to attend the schools closest to their homes. But Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth—who had filed a transfer petition on his two daughters’ behalf—decided he wouldn’t wait for a decision. Shuttlesworth’s home had been bombed the previous Christmas Day, so he was well aware of the dangers of challenging segregationists. The bombing of Reverend Shuttlesworth’s home wasn’t an isolated incident. The Klan lighted so much dynamite in Birmingham during the 1950s and early 1960s that the city became known as “Bombingham.” After Shuttlesworth’s house was bombed, he emerged from the basement unscathed and led hundreds of African Americans onto buses in defiance of Jim Crow laws the next day.

On the morning of September 9, 1957, Shuttlesworth attempted to enroll his daughters, Patricia Ann and Ruby Fredericka, and two boys from their neighborhood—twelve-year-old Walter Wilson and seventeen-year-old Nathaniel Lee—at John Herbert Phillips High School. Two hours after the school day started, Reverend Shuttlesworth, his wife, Ruby, their bodyguard, and another civil rights activist drove the children to the school. A group of about twenty Klansmen was waiting for them at Phillips High, and the men attacked Shuttlesworth as he climbed out of the car. Other men tried to pull his wife, daughters, and the two boys from the car before police intervened. Reverend Shuttlesworth ran from the mob to divert the attackers’ attention. He was knocked to the ground and beaten with brass knuckles, metal chains, and wooden clubs.

The reverend and his wife were treated for cuts and bruises at University Hospital. He vowed to try to enroll the students again the next morning. “Whether they kill us or not,” he told The Birmingham News. Even though Shuttlesworth decided to postpone his plans for the next day, that didn’t stop crowds of white segregationists from gathering outside Phillips High and other schools in anticipation of their return to their all-white schools.

When students arrived at Woodlawn High School on September 10, 1957, two hanging black effigies greeted them. Another one was hung that morning. Woodlawn High students boycotted classes in protest of possible integration, even though principal Ralph Martin threatened them with suspension. A handful of Woodlawn High students staged an impromptu demonstration at the school’s flagpole, where they raised two Confederate flags. Other students defiantly waved the Confederate Stars and Bars while chanting, “Two! Four! Six! Eight! We don’t want to integrate!” The Birmingham News reported that assistant police chief J. C. Lance stopped two cars containing ten Woodlawn High students and confiscated a heavy club and a plastic-covered sack of firecrackers.

“A number of students boycotted classes at Woodlawn High School this morning in protests against integration,” The Birmingham News reported. “Youths demonstrated noisily on the school grounds and threw rocks at passing buses containing Negroes. They also jeered at passing automobiles containing Negroes.”

A few days later, Shuttlesworth abandoned his plans and Birmingham’s public schools remained segregated. It seemed the all-white schools would remain closed to African Americans forever. On January 14, 1963, newly elected Alabama governor Wallace delivered his infamous inauguration speech, in which he proclaimed, “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation

forever." Six months later, Wallace stood in a doorway of a building at the University of Alabama and blocked the entrance of two African American students trying to enroll at the school.

The summer of 1963 changed the course of history in Birmingham and the United States. Dr. Martin Luther King and other leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and Southern Christian Leadership Conference led sit-ins at lunch counters and marches in the streets of Birmingham. King and other leaders were repeatedly jailed for their efforts. In a moment that would ultimately be a turning point in the civil rights movement, Birmingham public safety commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor ordered his officers to turn their dogs and water hoses on thousands of student protesters during the Children's Crusade. Hundreds of young demonstrators were arrested and expelled from Birmingham schools, until federal courts intervened.

Finally, Birmingham School Board attorneys announced on August 30, 1963, that three schools—Graymont Elementary, Ramsay High, and West End High—would be desegregated. Demonstrators chanted and waved Confederate flags when eleven-year-old Dwight Armstrong and his ten-year-old brother, Floyd, attempted to enroll at Graymont Elementary on September 4, 1963. That night, attorney Arthur Shores's home was bombed for the second time in fifteen days and riots erupted in the streets. One man was shot dead and twenty-one others were injured. The next day, as President John F. Kennedy anguished over federal intervention in Birmingham, Wallace ordered the city to close the schools.

After a federal court order reopened the schools, the Armstrong brothers enrolled at Graymont Elementary on September 9, 1963. Richard Walker, another black student, enrolled at Ramsay High, and Patricia Marcus and Josephine Powell became the first black students at West End High. White students boycotted classes at West End High and assembled in the football field, where a student played a slow rendition of "Dixie" on a trumpet.

Six days later, an unthinkable act of terror changed Birmingham forever. A bomb exploded and killed four girls as they prepared for Sunday school at 16th Street Baptist Church. Three fourteen-year-old girls—Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins—were killed, along with eleven-year-old Denise McNair. The four girls were targeted—along with everyone else attending the church—for one reason: the color of their skin.

Within days, the Federal Bureau of Investigation identified the prime suspects: Robert E. Chambliss, a well-known racist nicknamed "Dynamite Bob," and his fellow Klansmen Thomas E. Blanton, Herman Frank Cash, and Bobby Frank Cherry. They were members of the violent Eastview No. 13 Klavern, which met at Woodlawn's city hall in the 1960s. Chambliss was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison in 1977; but decades would pass before the other men faced criminal trials for their heinous crimes. Blanton and Cherry weren't convicted until nearly forty years after the bombing. Cash died in 1994 without ever being charged.

Nearly two years after the men bombed 16th Street Baptist Church, Cynthia Holder and the other African American students arrived at Woodlawn High for their first day. They were happy to see that the mobs of angry white segregationists, which greeted many black students at other newly integrated schools in the past, weren't there to meet them. A handful of Birmingham police officers stood guard outside the school, and the African American students were quickly ushered inside. Their plans to integrate Woodlawn High had largely been a secret. Only the students, their parents, and Reverend Dansby were aware of what they intended to do.

Time was slowly healing wounds in Birmingham, but racial tension still simmered, especially in the Deep South. In March 1965, Martin Luther King led an estimated 25,000 protesters on a fifty-four-mile march

from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol building in Montgomery to show support for African American voting rights. Three weeks before Cynthia and the others enrolled at Woodlawn, a six-day race riot erupted in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles and resulted in thirty-four deaths, more than one thousand injuries, over three thousand arrests, and more than $40 million in property damage.

Somehow, the historic dismantling of Woodlawn High's color barrier went largely unnoticed in Birmingham, or at least outside of the school.

"It was very low-key and not much publicity was made of it when we went," Cynthia Holder said. "Our parents tried to keep it a secret. When we got to the school, we had to climb the big front steps. My parents told me to look straight forward and keep moving, and that's what I did."

The Birmingham News reported that afternoon that the new school year was off to a quiet start. According to the newspaper, fifty-three African American students had been approved for transfers to Birmingham's predominately all-white schools. Along with the six black students who started classes at Woodlawn High, eleven enrolled at Ensley High, nine at Phillips High, thirteen at Ramsay High, and two at West End High, and twelve others who enrolled in lower grades.

"Birmingham schools opened for registration of an expected 70,000 students today, beginning the third year of integrated operation without incident," the newspaper reported.

Dr. Theo Wright, the superintendent of the Birmingham Board of Education, told The Birmingham News, "We're very happy that everything is orderly. There were no incidents and the children who were approved for entrance were enrolled and there was no trouble anywhere."

Cynthia Holder and the other African American students weren't the only ones starting their first day at Woodlawn High. Tandy Gerelds, a newly hired science teacher and assistant football coach, was also beginning a new stage of his life. Gerelds was very familiar with Woodlawn High; he'd graduated from the school only five years earlier. A popular student and athlete, Gerelds was returning to teach at his alma mater only a few months after graduating from Auburn University. The young newlywed was anxious about starting his teaching and coaching career in the community that was home for most of his life.

It wouldn't take Gerelds long to realize he wasn't returning to the same school he'd left.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Marcus:

As people who live in the modest era should be update about what going on or details even knowledge to make all of them keep up with the era that is always change and move forward. Some of you maybe may update themselves by looking at books. It is a good choice for you personally but the problems coming to you is you don't know which one you should start with. This Woodlawn: One Hope. One Dream. One Way. is our recommendation to help you keep up with the world. Why, because this book serves what you want and need in this era.

Anna Rangel:

The guide untitled Woodlawn: One Hope. One Dream. One Way. is the book that recommended to you to see. You can see the quality of the e-book content that will be shown to you actually. The language that author use to explained their ideas are easily to understand. The copy writer was did a lot of investigation when write the book, and so the information that they share for you is absolutely accurate. You also could get the e-book of Woodlawn: One Hope. One Dream. One Way. from the publisher to make you more enjoy free time.

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