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Booker High School is known nationally for its Visual and Performing Arts program, its championship athletics and its diverse student enrollment.

But more than 35 years ago, the Booker school complex in Sarasota, including its elementary and junior high schools, was on the verge of extinction.

The junior high and high school campuses were closed in 1967, and its all-black enrollment was bused to Sarasota or Riverview high schools, in white neighborhoods, as part of the Sarasota County School Board's plan to integrate the education system in the wake of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The busing system was a typical desegregation plan in several Southern states, including North Carolina and Georgia, during the 1960s. And although the black community approved of integration, it did not support the closing of its neighborhood schools, a focal point for the predominantly black community in Sarasota's Newtown.

When the School Board stated its plan in 1969 to shut down Booker Elementary and Amaryllis Park Primary schools and relocate the buildings to Southside Elementary on Webber Street, the black community took action.

"It was the straw that broke the camel's back," said Sarasota's vice mayor, Fredd Atkins, who was a high school senior in 1969.

The School Board's plan sparked a boycott and several civil lawsuits from the Newtown Citizens Committee, an organization of parents and students from the black community, led by John Rivers and funeral home director Jerome Stevens.

"We had some 20 plans for the schools, and they concentrated on that one plan: to phase out the schools," said Rivers, then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The black community was running out of options, he said, and "at that time, we decided we had to do something."

The committee hired Steve Stottlemeyer, then a new law-school graduate, who was white, to represent Newtown in its pursuit to save its schools. Stottlemeyer's older brother, Charlie, co-owned Stottlemeyer and Shoemaker Lumber Co. in Sarasota; Charlie Stottlemeyer's partner was his brother-in-law John Shoemaker.

With Steve Stottlemeyer's help, the Newtown Citizens Committee hoped to halt the School Board's plan and to introduce one that would require "balanced busing," so white students would be bused into Newtown.

"Integration could have been easy," Rivers said. "There were white students who were within two blocks of the school."

Rivers said he sought the advice of businessman John Shoemaker, who had served on the Sarasota County School Board from 1958 to 1964, and who suggested Steve Stottlemeyer take the case.

"Then, many lawyers didn't want to touch it," Rivers said. "We didn't have the money, and we went with the route that was most approachable."

Steve Stottlemeyer said he had no expectation of being paid and said he felt obligated to help less-fortunate members of his community.

"The black community in Newtown saw the closing of Booker as a slap in the face," said Stottlemeyer, who owns a convenience store and gas-station business in Sarasota.

"It was a source of pride: They had good athletics, great music and a band program and, again, it was located in their area."

Atkins said he was emotionally drained when he was bused to Sarasota High. His grades dropped from honor-student status at Booker to near-failing at Sarasota, he said.

"The pain I went through over the last two years came to a crescendo of agony and disgust," Atkins said. "You have a bond with a high school. It's like ripping your heart out."

Inez Barnes, daughter of the late Jerome Stevens, said she's proud that her father fought for Booker. She was a ninth-grader in 1969 and was bused to Brookside Middle School in Sarasota.

Booker is "a school that people can still relate to," Barnes said. "My father didn't have that fear of losing his job. He was a strong fighter of black rights."

Plus, Stottlemeyer said, the Booker school complex was a source of jobs, a "huge engine of economics."

Ed James, whose mother, Annie McElroy, was in the first graduating class at Booker High School in 1935, said that Stottlemeyer was an "unlikely warrior."

"Steve was a young boy from a prominent family," he said. "He was very good and valuable to the movement."

Atkins said the majority of the black community was surprised that Stottlemeyer willingly joined the effort. He had his doubts, he said.

"We had to make sure he really represented us," Atkins said.

And Stottlemeyer did.

Days before the 1969-70 school year began, Stottlemeyer, members of the Newtown Citizens Committee, parents, students and the Sarasota County School Board lawyer, Richard W. Cooney, found themselves sitting anxiously in the federal court in Tampa before Judge Ben Krentzman.

Krentzman would decide the fate of the Booker school complex. Would it remain open to be used as an education facility, or would it be closed for good?

On Aug. 28, 1969, the Sarasota Herald-Tribune reported that Krentzman denied the Newtown Citizens Committee petition to modify the School Board's desegregation plan -- but not before he assigned homework to the School Board members.

Stottlemeyer said the judge asked that the School Board devise a plan that would reopen the Booker campus by the 1970-71 school year.

"If they failed," Stottlemeyer said, "he (Krentzman) would overcome the School Board and create a directive for the reopening of the Booker campus."

Gene Pillot, who was the Sarasota High School principal from 1964 to 1968 and superintendent in 1971, said that the School Board's decision to close the Booker school campus was a disaster.

"Over all those years, a lot of good was done even in the context of a lot of mistakes," he said. "I think even then, not 100 percent, but a strong majority knew that the right thing to do was the desegregation."

And although there was a boycott, he didn't recall any violence.

"That's in respect to the black community," Pillot said. "On both sides, we wanted to stand up for our rights, but not be violent toward each other."

According to an article published Aug. 29, 1969, in the Herald-Tribune, the School Board directed a study and named Jerald Strickland, assistant superintendent for instruction, to make recommendations for new uses for the Booker complex by February 1970.

In September 1970, the Booker schools were opened as an integrated facility. The Visual and Performing Arts program was established in 1979.

"Jerry (Strickland) was the person who made it work," Pillot said. "His personal qualities and determination was to make the schools the best for all people. If he hadn't been there, I'm not so sure it would have gone the way it did."

If the black community hadn't fought to keep its schools functional, Atkins said, Booker High School would not be more than a plot of land used for housing.

"We pressed the white majority into coexisting with us," Atkins said.

The school also represents a landmark in Sarasota's history and especially for the black community, Atkins said.

"We kept our colors, our mascot, and we were able to hold our place," Atkins said. "We retained our community."

Stottlemeyer left the practice of law in the mid-'70s and moved to North Carolina before returning to Sarasota in the early 1990s.

"Sarasota today is a pretty cosmopolitan and liberal place in all kinds of ways," he said. "I think that case was an important thing that happened in the changing of the old guard of Sarasota."