

AUGUST 1, 2023

**BRIGADIER GENERAL EDWARD O GOURDIN
AFRICAN AMERICAN VETERANS PARK OPENING**

Thank you, Mayor Wu, Mr. Santiago, Liz Meyer, Representative Tyler, the members of Veterans & Friends, and so many others – all who have worked so tirelessly to create this beautiful park, and who continue the work of educating all of us about the value of service and sacrifice freely given by our Black veterans and OUR grandfather, Edward O. Gourdin.

Granddaddy was everything that everyone else has already said about him today – scholar, athlete, soldier, judge – but most of all he was a person – a human being – just like you and me. And if he is to be an inspiration for all of us, but especially to young people just coming up, then they need to recognize that he was once a young person, like them, just starting out as they are.

Our grandmother, Amalia Ponce Gourdin, tried constantly to ingrain in us an appreciation of Granddaddy's achievements. But, like most young folk, we had no frame of reference, no life experiences of our own which would enable us to understand and appreciate the scope of what we were being told. The sheer magnitude of Granddaddy's accomplishments, especially coming as they did during a time when Black achievement was even more aggressively hindered and discredited than it is today, was often lost on us.

In 1997, my Dad excitedly shared with me a Jacksonville Times newspaper article printed on the 100th anniversary of Granddaddy's birth, recounting his achievements. My Dad was extremely proud and very much aware of the enormity of his father's accomplishments. He'd say, "Girl?! THAT'S your grandfather!".

It wasn't until I started working with the Veterans and Friends Committee in 2021 that I truly grasped the enormity of our grandfather's achievements. The Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center at BU graciously provided me with copies of letters written by Granddaddy to his mother, our great grandmother Felicia. The letters spanned the 1923 track & field season as well as his time at the 1924 Paris Olympics. I spent hours reading the letters – letters written with words carefully and thoughtfully chosen by a son for his mother, and I began to see my grandfather as a young man, just starting out, excited and proud but also apprehensive and unsure. He wrote to his mother recounting his experiences, his wins and losses, his aspirations and doubts, and I came to see him not just as his granddaughter but also as a mother myself, remembering my own son's letters from boot camp. I saw in Granddaddy's words a vulnerability that we all feel when faced with the enormity of our next steps and where they will lead. I saw him not as the fully realized, multi-accomplished leader and advocate that we honor today, but as the young person who had only dreamed up to that point. If we want Edward Gourdin to be an inspiration to our young people, we need to tell them not only about his accomplishments but also about his humanity, about the child that came before the man.

Here's what I'd like to leave you with – Time and Context Matter.

The key to leveraging and benefitting more meaningfully from the achievements of our grandfather, like all the other Black veterans honored by this park, is to convey the story that he began as a person who was still navigating his place in the world as it was then. He achieved, not because he was groomed for achievement, but because he believed that he could. He was unaware that the result of his accomplishments would someday stand as a testament to, and inspiration for, Black and Native American achievement... but they do indeed stand the test of time.

Let this space, this memorial park, be a place of reverence, of thoughtfulness and respite, of knowledge and self-awareness, but also a place to dream. Let this space not only revere the sacrifices of Black veterans but be a place where a young person may come to be inspired, and to come to believe that he or she CAN... simply by knowing that HE, our grandfather, DID.
Thank you.