

UA, UNA decades apart last week

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By [Bob Martin](#) , Publisher

Last week at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa it was revealed that two black students had been refused admission to a campus sorority because of their race, one who was confirmed as the granddaughter of former State Supreme Court Justice John England, Jr.

This was at the same time, 122 miles up the road in Florence, a week-long event was underway at the University of North Alabama (UNA) commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the admission of its first black student, Wendell Wilkie Gunn of Tusculumbia. Gunn had been attending college at Tennessee State University in Nashville, a traditionally black institution.

It was back in 1963 at the beginning of the summer session at the University of Alabama when Gov. George Wallace made his "stand in the schoolhouse door" attempt to block Vivian Malone and James Hood from enrolling there. President Kennedy then federalized the Alabama National Guard to ensure the enrollment of the two students.

As I wrote last week, I was fresh out of UNA or Florence State College at that time, working at the daily newspaper in Florence and was assigned to cover the Gunn enrollment story and got to know him in the process. Last week I caught up with Wendell at the Shoals Marriott, where we were both staying. He had brought his family from Stamford, Conn, where they now live and where his business, Gunn Solutions, is located.

"The fact that it happened between 1963 and 1965, a time with a lot of turmoil, and the fact that my matriculation happened without incident is a testament to something," Gunn stated. "Looking back on it, it makes me think there was something special about this area."

Gunn's parents couldn't afford to send him back to Nashville, so he thought, "naively," he said "that since it had already happened at the University of Alabama, they will have to accept me here." As Gunn related to me, he "didn't know enough to be nervous" as he walked into the college administration building and asked for a registration form. "The clerk at the counter said she'd be right back and disappeared. Then the registrar came out, next a vice president, and finally the president, Dr. E. B. Norton, appeared and told me they couldn't register me." Then something strange happened or I thought it was strange. Dr. Norton said to me: "Son, we can't enroll you today, but if you sue us, we'll have to."

Soon after that Gunn said his mother called Tuskegee attorney Fred Gray and the rest is history. Even Gov. Wallace stayed away. "It was the easiest case of my life," Gray has said. It is my perception that Wallace had already taken his public and political stance on the matter, so why cause any more problems? Besides, I believe that on the non-political side of his nature Wallace wasn't as strident on the racial issue as he was perceived to be. In his later years he has confirmed that feeling of mine, but it doesn't excuse the emotional pain he caused many of the people in this state.

By the end of his first year Gunn says the initial atmosphere of silence and heightened security measures eventually developed into campus-wide expressions of warmth, support, and even affirmation. At the Honors Day ceremony the following spring in 1964, Gunn was there as a member of the college choir. When his name was called to accept the award as the school's top physics student, he says he was totally shocked. "I knew I was doing OK in physics, but because not many students communicated with me, I had no idea how anyone else was doing." As he walked to the stage to accept the award he recalls that "the auditorium filled with applause and his eyes filled with tears." He graduated with degrees in math and chemistry in 1965.

Gunn went on to serve in the White House for two years as President Ronald Reagan's international-trade adviser. In addition to his national political service, Gunn worked for many years in the world of corporate finance and eventually founded his own successful software company, Gunn Solutions.

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Gunn's warm reception at the University of North Alabama was quite a contrast to what is reported to have happened on Sorority Row at the University of Alabama last week.

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