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Central Arkansas & Beyond!

Honoring Jon Richardson, the University of Arkansas's First African American Scholarship Football Player



by Gisele Hudson

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Jon Richardson was the first African American scholarship football player at the University of Arkansas, Arkansas 'flag ship' university in 1969. He helped to pave the way for thousands of other athletes to attend afterwards. The late football player was honored with a plaque dedication recently at the University of Arkansas by the Razorback Athletics at Difference Makers Plaza in Fayetteville during a week of activities. University of Arkansas Acting Chancellor Dr. Charles Robinson, Athletic Director Hunter Yurachek and nearly a dozen of Richardson's family members and friends dedicated the plaque in his honor on October 16, 2021.

"Jon Richardson's impact went beyond the football field," Robinson said, in an email. "As a student-athlete and the first African American scholarship football player at the University of Arkansas, Richardson believed in what he could accomplish as an individual and in what he and his team could accomplish together. He helped start a movement that not only inspired thousands of future Razorbacks, but also helped shape our campus into what it is now, and that work continues today. Jon was a true difference maker and I'm glad we were able to honor him."



from news.uark.edu

Muskie Harris, rehab director of the Muskie Harris Rehabilitation Services, was instrumental in getting the scholarship in Richardson's name started.

"I presented it to the University of Arkansas Alumni Association for them to recognize Jon," Harris said. "It was put off last year because of the Covid 19 pandemic. We ended up doing it this year at homecoming. It is important because the footprints are there, and we need to keep it going. His name will live on through the Jon L. Richardson Memorial Scholarship and the students receiving them."

Harris, who also played for the Razorbacks, said Richardson helped to recruit him and other athletics to the university in 1973 from Little Rock Central High School.

Born and raised in Little Rock, Richardson lettered for coach Frank Broyles' Razorbacks from 1970-72 as a running back. As a senior, he broke a school record with 501 kickoff return yards. His 19 rushing touchdowns during his final year still ranks on the UA career record list.

The Richardson family were also honored guests and flipped the switch in the lighting of Donald W. Reynold's Razorback Stadium. They were also honorary captains for the Auburn-Arkansas game.

"We were really excited about it, and it was a big deal," said Beverly Richardson, Jon's sister. "Jon was the first student athlete on the wall outside the stadium on the Difference Makers Wall. Inside the stadium, his picture is up on the University of Arkansas Sports Hall of Honor."

His sister, Brenda Richardson Gilbert, spoke at the dedication ceremony. The family was given a tour of the athletic facilities and represented Jon on the field for the unveiling of the statue before the start of the game.



Dr. Ron Rainey (President, Univ. of Arkansas Alumni Association Board), Pam Richardson Brown (sister of Jon Richardson), Muskie Harris (Chair, Heritage & Unity Breakfast), Beverly Richardson (sister of Jon Richardson), Mike Davis, Wanda Ashley attend the Heritage & Unity Breakfast honoring African American student-athletes at the University of Arkansas

"The family was absolutely amazed, overwhelmed and proud of the support from the university leadership, former players, coaches and fans who were there to greet the family and reassure us of the importance that they felt Jon played at the university. Jon set a path for other people for years to come. It just blew me away. It was hard for the family, but it was worth it."

An announcement of the unveiling and scholarship was broadcast at the UAPB and the University of Arkansas game on Saturday, October 23. A "Preserving the Legacy of the African American Influence in the Success of Arkansas Razorback Athletic Program" was held at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center that same week. In addition, the Central Arkansas Alumni Chapter held a fundraising banquet. Richardson was inducted into the Southwest Conference Hall of Fame posthumously last year. He died of a heart attack on January 18, 2002.

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