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Hiawatha History Comes To Life in Presentation

A Hiawatha native is remembered as a basketball legend and civil rights pioneer.

As part of Black History Month, Hiawatha Middle and High School students Thursday learned more about John McClendon Jr., born in Hiawatha in 1915.

Milton Katz, a professor of American Studies at the Kansas City Art Institute and author of a book on McLendon's life on and off the court, spoke to students.

Katz said McLendon was more than just a highly successful basketball coach, breaking down racial barriers along the way(play audio 11 secs)

While attending the University of Kansas in the 1930's, McLendon met and became friends with Dr. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball. Katz said Naismith taught McClendon two special things--- basketball itself and the game of life (play audio: 22 secs)

His first collegiate coaching job at North Carolina College included the famous "secret game" between his players and the Duke University basketball team in 1944---the first collegiate basketball contest where blacks and whites competed on the same floor-- and occurring ten years before the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision (play audio: 28 secs)

McLendon's career included many firsts and he went on to receive many honors---including being inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 1979. However, it wasn't as a coach but as a "contributor"(play audio:13 secs)

McLendon ended his 25-year professional coaching career with a winning percentage of 76 percent, a lifetime total of 523 victories and 165 losses.

His amazing career culminated in his efforts as a basketball ambassador, traveling to 58 countries teaching the fundamentals of the game and value of sportsmanship. He died in October of 1999 at the age of 84.