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Honoring the Legacy of A. Dwight Pettit

We had the honor of learning about Mr. A. Dwight Pettit's story before meeting him in person by reading a section from his book *Under Color of Law*. Mr. Pettit's journey is truly inspiring. From beginning as a teenager whose father fought for his right to attend Aberdeen High School, to later becoming an attorney who fought for justice in his father's case—his life reflects a full-circle moment of perseverance and purpose.

The sections we read revealed what it was like to be the first African American male to integrate Aberdeen High School in 1960. We learned about both the difficulties of integration—denied admission, uncomfortable stares, constant pressure to be cautious—and the positive moments, such as football victories and meaningful friendships he formed. We encourage everyone to read his book to understand the importance of the fight for equality and justice, as well as the long, grueling process many African Americans endured to achieve personal success. After reading, we were left with many questions about his experiences in Aberdeen, his path into the legal field, and his perspective on current events.

On November 22, 2025, Ms. Janet Baldwin and our group leaders traveled to Mr. Pettit's law office in Baltimore, MD. Upon entering, we immediately noticed the numerous decorations lining the walls and tables—plaques, degrees, photographs, news articles, and countless law books. Seeing his achievements displayed so prominently was both beautiful and a testament to his resilience. We sat with him in his office and explained the research we've been conducting on the seven Bainbridge students and Cecil County. He listened attentively. He then briefly reviewed parts of his own history—much of which we had read—before inviting us to ask our questions.

We asked about many topics: his application process for Aberdeen High School, his reasons for transferring, his football journey, his law school experience, and his father's character, among others. He explained that his love for football played a major role in his transfer. At that time, segregated "colored schools" were only funded for one sport—basketball—and he knew he excelled far more in football. His football ability helped him gain recognition at Aberdeen, making aspects of the integration process slightly more manageable, despite being one of the only African American male students there.

However, transferring to Aberdeen was far from easy. He was initially denied admission by the Board of Education due to poor standardized test scores from third or fourth grade. He explained that officials used those outdated scores to push a narrative that he was not academically capable. His father did not agree with their reasoning and decided to file a lawsuit. The NAACP, including attorneys such as Juanita Mitchell, Thurgood Marshall, Jack Greenburg, and Tucker Dearing, took the case to court. Chief Judge Rozelle Thomsen, from the United States District Court for the District of Maryland located in Baltimore, ultimately ruled in Pettit's favor because Aberdeen High School was not in compliance with required law and procedure. With him being granted admission into Aberdeen High School, Mr. Pettit explained that he then felt immense pressure to prove that he was academically capable, prompting his father to hire tutors to ensure he succeeded.

Mr. Pettit answered our questions with sincerity and emotion. Hearing him relive these experiences made the story feel even more real, especially when he spoke about his victories surrounding his father's case. He expressed deep gratitude for his father, George Pettit, who supported him in countless ways and always pushed him to strive for excellence. Representing his father in court years later was, for him, both a proud and historic moment. He also shared that his faith plays a

major role in his life and that he would not have accomplished what he did without God. (Interestingly, his law office is directly across from a church.)

Meeting Mr. Pettit was truly unforgettable. From the rich history displayed around his office to the memorable stories he shared, it was impossible to leave without feeling inspired. Our essential research question—Why did parents fight so hard to get their children into schools where they were not wanted or accepted?—was one we posed directly to Mr. Pettit. He answered, “My father wanted more for me and the best for me. He knew I should’ve had the right to education.”

Through our experiences—meeting Mr. Sonny at the Hockessin Colored School, reading about the Bulah family, and reviewing Mr. Kyle Dixon’s thesis—we’ve noticed a consistent truth: parents wanted better opportunities for their children because they deserved the same educational access as white students. They were willing to fight, persist, and challenge a deeply broken system to create new possibilities for future generations of African American children. We sincerely thank Mr. Pettit for taking the time to meet with us and speak about his journey.

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Jahzir Law and Amare Motley are high school seniors, serving as Youth Leaders as a part of our Elkton Colored School Museum Youth Interpretive Space Project.