Ernest Westfield.

I came here in 1961.

I think I was, it was just designed for me to be here.

I started out in Knoxville, Tennessee, and right after of high school the Chicago Cubs signed me, and they sent me down to Carlsbad, New Mexico to play baseball. I traveled all around the country playing, and after a while the Cubs released me, so I went back to Knoxville, Tennessee. And then one day I was at a pool hall and I saw this sign that says that the Birmingham Black Barons was going to be in Knoxville, Tennessee so they people that had sponsored to bring them there asked me to pitch against them. And I pitched against them, and pitched a no-hitter against them and they asked me to go on the road with them; and I didn’t know that a gentleman up here in Champaign by the name of Wardell Jackson had purchased the team, so when the season ended, he called and said, “Would you come up to Champaign?” He said, “I’ll put you up in an apartment, pay all your bills and everything, but I want you to start for me pitching up here the next year.” So that’s how I got here.

Wardell Jackson owned the Birmingham Black Barons, the Philadelphia Stars, and the Champaign Eagles.

Satchel Paige, one of the *best* known Negro League players came right here to Champaign-Urbana.

Wardell Jackson, he kept baseball *alive* in the black community. Every Sunday people would show up for beer and barbeque at that park.

We had an Eagle Park here in Champaign-Urbana.

We came here, played up in Royal, Buckley, Loda.

Our kids are not playing baseball like they used to back in the day, you know, but they’re still playing up in Buckley, Loda, Gifford, Flatville, places like that, you know matter of fact we’ve had a lot of pros that made it to the Major Leagues to come out of there. Tom Fletcher, Darren Fletcher, you know to come out of these areas to play professional baseball.

The League, was really started on February the 13th of 1920, okay? Now that’s considered to be the birth date of the Negro League.

Congress passed a resolution making May the 20th, Negro League Baseball Day all over the country.

Champaign-Urbana had a lot to do with that history. Matter fact, a lot of the teams winded up staying here, it ended here. So a lot of those teams died right here in Champaign-Urbana. And that’s why the history’s so important, and when they start to check it, they say, “Well we didn’t know we had *ties* to a national thing like,” but the city of Champaign and Urbana both have ties to that national history.

But I still have this love for baseball. Matter fact I write about it, I write poetry about baseball.

It’s called *Negro League Black Men.*

*They played the game of baseball because they loved the game,*

*But never did they think that it would be harder to get into the Baseball Hall of Fame.*

*They were beautiful black men, who played the game with pride*

*But I just wish each of you could’ve seen James “Cool Papa” Bell when he ran at full stride.*

*He was so fast that daylight couldn’t keep up with his speed,*

*And when he was on the base path, all he needed was a small lead.*

*But then there was Josh Gibson, the best hitter of all time*

*Hit a 580-foot homerun out of Yankee Stadium,*

*And the ball, they still can’t find.*

*But then there was Satchel Page, who was on everybody’s all-star list*

*Who threw a pass so hard that batters just missed.*

*But there were so many Negro League players, who never lived their dreams,*

*And that was one day to play for an American, or National League team.*

*So let’s honor those black players, who played the game so well,*

*By keeping their history alive for the younger generations to tell.*

*But let’s never forget the struggles, and how hard they had to fight,*

*Because that was a time, when only the ball was white.*