

Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss Fund the Digitization of the Virginia Interscholastic Association Archives at Virginia State University

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Tennis Legends ensure that records will be available for generations to come.

Professional tennis legends Billie Jean King and Ilana Kloss have made a generous donation to process, digitize, and catalog the Virginia Interscholastic Association (VIA) archives, which are housed on the campus of Virginia State University. This effort will preserve the remarkable achievements made by Virginia African Americans during the Jim Crow era.

"Ilana and I are happy to support this important preservation matter because the more you know about history, the more you know about yourself and the more you can shape the future," King said.

By law, southern states functioned as two societies, one Black, the other white. Elementary, junior high, and high schools were decidedly separate, but the distribution of state funds made them woefully unequal. From 1954 through 1970, the VIA provided high school students with interscholastic athletic competitions and other extracurricular activities including band, music, science, and math competitions.

Arthur Ashe (tennis), Bennie McRae (NFL), and Robert (Bobby) Dandridge (NBA) are among scores of VIA-trained athletes who won college scholarships and became pro standouts, despite the barriers. Ninety athletes, coaches and contributors have been inducted into the VIA Hall of Fame since it was established in 2016. Doug Smith, an award-winning tennis journalist with USA Today (1986-2001) along with eight other VIA graduates, will be inducted on June 23, 2023, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"We look forward to ensuring these important records are digitized," Kloss said. "It's truly a pleasure to be able to do something meaningful to support an organization that has honored both Arthur Ashe and Doug Smith."

The digitization process will be coordinated by the non-profit organization Teaching for Change. Deborah Menkart, the organization's executive director, said, "When an increasing number of state laws are suppressing history instruction, it is heartening to be involved in an effort that is doing just the opposite. Young people today benefit from hearing the stories of African American administrators, teachers, and students who collectively 'made a way out of no way'."

Virginia State University President Makola M. Abdullah, Ph.D. stressed the importance of the donation. "At VSU, our mantra is GREATER Happens Here. This is another example of that. We are honored to provide a home for these archives that offer a record of the rich history of Virginia's African American community. Many of our students stand on the shoulders of these Virginians who strived for and achieved GREATER. Now, these documents and photos will be available digitally to our students and the broader community to inspire them and serve as an example of what is achievable."

James Hollins, chairperson of the VIA Heritage Association, Inc. added, "It is a blessing for all the VIA alumni to know that these records will be made accessible for generations to come."



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