



Black 14 member John Griffin, of Denver, hugs Elder Rick Balli, of Centennial, Colo., after sharing his thoughts on a food donation partnership with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Salvation Army's Emergency Service Center in Aurora, Colo., on Tuesday Nov. 17, 2020. Food donated by the Church of Jesus Christ was unloaded and will be redistributed to a number of charities in Colorado. | Marc Piscotty, for the Deseret News

FAITH U.S. & WORLD UTAH

How the 'Black 14' and Latter-day Saints became partners moving mountains of food to those in need

The wound caused by a college football injustice 51 years ago is healing. This week, that healing is expanding across the country

By Tad Walch | Nov 17, 2020, 2:00pm MDT

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The label affixed to each 1,600-pound pallet of donated food heralds a new alliance unimaginable a half-century ago and hatched only this past spring — a partnership between the “Black 14” and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A semitrailer full of the hulking, shrink-wrapped pallets arrived Monday in Laramie, Wyoming. It was the first of nine truckloads of food worth hundreds of thousands of dollars that the partners will deliver this week to food pantries in eight states across the country, including Denver on Tuesday.

The deliveries are another step in healing a wound opened by an act of injustice that has been called a tragedy — the day the University of Wyoming's football coach kicked 14 Black players off the school's nationally ranked 1969 team on the eve of a game with Brigham Young University.

While this story of redemption includes Super Bowl champions and a former Heisman Trophy candidate, football is not its foundation. Its true roots are faith and forgiveness.

“The grace of God is all over this. If we didn't have that grace in play, this probably never would have happened,” said John Griffin, a devout Catholic and the team's star wide receiver.



Catholic Charities employee Mark Hahn, of Denver, helps unload food donated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in a partnership with the Black 14 Philanthropy, at the Salvation Army's Emergency Service Center in Aurora, Colo., Tuesday Nov. 17, 2020. The food will be redistributed to a number of charities in Colorado. In attendance was Black 14 member John Griffin, of Denver, who helped organize the donation and was on hand to share his thoughts on the partnership. | Marc Piscotty, for the Deseret News

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The painful wound received much-needed stitches last year when the University of Wyoming formally apologized to the group of football players who came to be known as the Black 14, who were guilty only of considering a protest. They had asked to meet with the coach about the idea of wearing black armbands during the BYU game to protest a Latter-day Saint priesthood policy, later changed in June 1978.

This week's food deliveries add a soothing balm to the remaining emotional scar tissue, Black 14 players said.

"They had the faith of a mustard seed and they've been able to move mountains," said Mark Hahn, volunteer and parish relations coordinator for Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Denver.

"It is remarkable," Griffin said. "This is an American story. Nobody could have written this 50 years ago, 10 years ago, two years ago. They can now. And it's a heartwarming story. It's not spin. It's real. It's in the hearts of all of us. If I passed away tomorrow, I have lived a full life. I have been a part of something that's much bigger than me."

In another sign of reconciliation, the Black 14 is adding the BYU logo to T-shirts they sell to raise money to educate and feed children. They hope to add Wyoming's logo, too, if legal issues can be surmounted. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is providing \$10,000 to help manufacture the shirts.

Black 14 member John Griffin, of Denver, poses for a portrait after sharing his thoughts on a food donation partnership with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Salvation Army's Emergency Service Center in Aurora, Colo., on Tuesday Nov. 17, 2020. Food donated by the Church of Jesus Christ was unloaded and redistributed to a number of charities in Colorado. | Marc Piscotty, for the Deseret News

A healing Thanksgiving story

As the pandemic ravaged the economy last spring, Griffin empathized with the people he saw on his local news reports lining up in their cars for food giveaways in the parking lot of the Denver Broncos' stadium.

He shared the images with two other members of the Black 14 — Mel Hamilton, who had been a starting offensive lineman on the team, and Tony "Mac the Sack" McGee, a fearsome pass rushing defensive end who won the 1984 Super Bowl with Washington.

They had helped launch the Black 14 Philanthropy and also knew that Wyoming has set up a campus food bank for students who couldn't get home and didn't have enough to eat after the university shut down in-person classes in March. They wanted to help.

"I'll call Gifford Nielsen," Hamilton said, referring to the former BYU and NFL quarterback and Heisman Trophy candidate who now is a General Authority Seventy for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

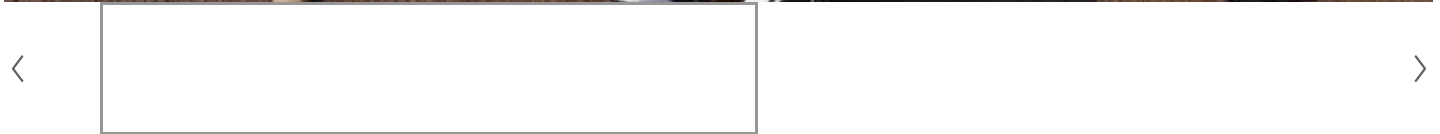
After working with church leaders, Elder Nielsen told Hamilton the church was prepared to donate 180 tons of goods to food pantries near the homes of Black 14 members. Earlier this year, church officials said that a single full truckload contains about \$45,000 worth of food.

Food donated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in a partnership with the Black 14 Philanthropy, is unloaded at the Salvation Army's Emergency Service Center in Aurora, Colo., on Tuesday Nov. 17, 2020. The food will be redistributed to a number of charities in Colorado. In attendance was Black 14 member John Griffin, of Denver, who helped organize the donation and was on hand to share his thoughts on the partnership. | Marc Piscotty, for the Deseret News

The news stunned Hamilton. He managed to whisper two words: "Sweet Jesus."

"This is all about healing and really the Savior's grace," said Elder Nielsen, who played six seasons for the Houston Oilers. He said this is just the beginning of the impact the partnership will have.

"People will say, 'What happened? You joined with your so-called adversary to do all of this? I want to be a part of that. How do I get involved?'" he said. "I can't think of a better Thanksgiving story than this. This is a story of joy, this is a story of gratitude. This is an answer to prayer."



Blackballed by their coach, university

Wyoming student activists approached the football players in the days leading up to the 1969 BYU game. They were organizing protests and wanted the football players to join them.

BYU sports had become a target for protests aimed at the church's policy restricting Blacks from entering the temple and receiving the priesthood. Black football players at San Jose State boycotted their game with BYU in 1968. Six months before the BYU-Wyoming game in 1969, the University of Texas at El Paso kicked Black track athletes off its team for refusing to participate in a track meet on the BYU campus.

Wyoming's Black players said they wanted to protest the policy and how some BYU players treated them in the previous year's game but weren't sure how. On Friday morning the day before the game, they went to see Cowboys head coach Lloyd Eaton, a tough disciplinarian who had turned Wyoming into a college football powerhouse.

Wyoming went undefeated during the 1967 regular season and nearly upset Louisiana State University in the Sugar Bowl on New Year's Day 1968. The Cowboys had won three straight Western Athletic Conference championships and were 6-0 and ranked 16th in the country entering the BYU game.

The players wore black armbands to meet with Eaton and planned to ask him if he thought they should wear them during the game. If not, the players were prepared to play without the armbands.

Eaton had embraced Black players in an era when many schools, including BYU, still had none, but Hamilton was troubled by at least one of the coach's previous statements. When Hamilton had told Eaton of his plans to marry his wife, Carey, who is white and a distant relative of Brigham Young, Eaton told him he wasn't prepared to have a University of Wyoming football scholarship support a mixed-race marriage.



Still, the players were not prepared for Eaton's reaction. He walked into their meeting and immediately banished them from the team without discussion. The players were speechless. When they finally tried to speak, he repeatedly silenced them by yelling at them to shut up, they said. Then he told them they should go on Negro welfare.

The governor of Wyoming intervened and national news outlets flocked to Laramie. Protesters threw bottles at BYU's team hotel the night before the game.

Eaton refused to change his mind. Government and school leaders chose to back him in a decision made at 2 a.m. on game day. The players were amputated from a successful team midseason for something they thought about doing.

The Black 14 were blackballed, one of them noted in a documentary.

In interviews over the years, including an ESPN documentary, they have described their pain as an albatross around their necks, a stigma. They said they became radioactive. Some couldn't find another football program to take them. McGee slid from a projected first round NFL pick to the third round. Others found employers didn't want to hire them.

For the record, Wyoming beat BYU the next day, 40-7, despite the loss of six starting players. The Black 14 sat in the stands. They watched again the following week when Wyoming beat a San Jose State team whose Black players wore black armbands to support them. (Two weeks later, some San Jose State players also wore black armbands when they played BYU.) Then the wheels came off the Wyoming program. UW lost the rest of its games and went 1-9 the following year. Eaton was forced out and was replaced by Fritz Shurmur, who later won a Super Bowl as defensive coordinator of the Green Bay Packers.

BYU fielded its first Black football player, Ron Knight, a junior college defensive back, in the fall of 1970.

A long road toward healing

The wound persisted. Many Wyoming fans chose the coach over the players, wearing gold armbands with Eaton written on them. Eaton adamantly defended his actions right up to his death in 2007.

“It took me 10 years to get over the anger,” said Griffin, who was one of three players who returned to play for Eaton the following year because he worried his credits wouldn’t transfer anywhere else. He graduated with a degree in education. In fact, 10 of the Black 14 would earn college degrees.

“I finally realized it wasn’t healthy for me to harbor that anger any longer,” Griffin added. “It was a tragedy, but all I could do is get on with my life and do the best I could and not let that hamper me. That was my focus from the late ’70s till now.”

A couple of years ago, he and others began to talk to the Wyoming administration, which had signaled a willingness to reconcile.

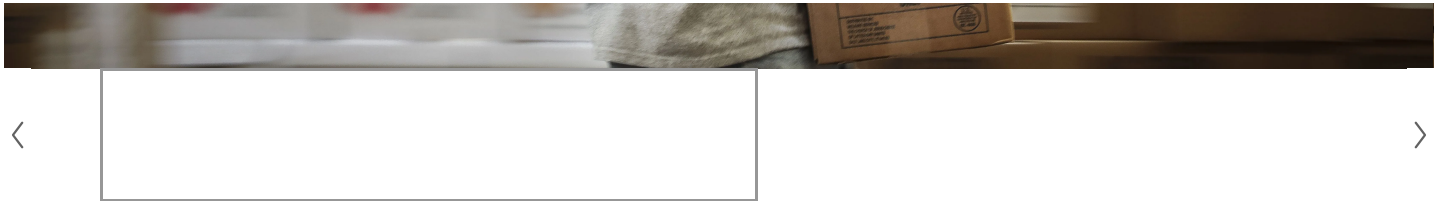
Last fall, during the 50th anniversary season of their dismissal, the university apologized, presented the players with letterman’s jackets and placed a plaque on the football stadium.

“Not to be heard, to be shunned, and to have your collegiate careers derailed as both students and athletes is a tragedy,” said the written apology, signed by the university’s president and athletic director. “Unfortunately it continued beyond your time here. ... Please accept this sincere apology from the University of Wyoming for the unfair way you were treated and for the hardships that treatment created for you.”

The players returned to campus for a week of events. They were honored on the field during halftime of a game. They were treated like heroes.

“Mind-boggling. I don’t know what the word is to put it as. I never thought I’d see that happen at the University of Wyoming,” defensive back Lionel Grimes told the Casper Star-Tribune.





How the partnership began

After 50 years, the wound created by Eaton and the university was healing. The rift over the Latter-day Saint policy had been addressed years earlier in the 1978 revelation announced by church leaders.

Before the BYU-Wyoming game in 2005, the director of the Latter-day Saint Institute of Religion on the Wyoming campus surprised Hamilton by inviting him to speak to his students, who had volunteered to make black armbands for Wyoming fans to wear to the game. He would speak in the very building he had picketed in 1969.

Hamilton accepted the invitation, and the mutual mustard seed was planted.

Mel Hamilton, a member of the University of Wyoming's Black 14, sits next to a memorial plaque at the entrance of War Memorial Stadium in Laramie, Wyoming. | Carey Hamilton

“Never did I hate the people of the Latter-day Saint religion,” Hamilton said. “It was a mission of mine to ... speak out wherever I went to clarify we don’t hate people. We just wanted that one policy changed. And thank God, there was a revelation that changed it.”

His son Malik became a Latter-day Saint years ago and by the time Wyoming apologized to the Black 14 last fall, Hamilton had an ongoing relationship with the institute and local church leaders. He invited them to Wyoming’s dinner honoring the Black 14 last fall because he felt there could be no celebration without the church. Laramie Wyoming Stake President Cory Allen bought 100 Black 14 T-shirts for Latter-day Saints to wear to the game the next day in honor of the players. He reserved one shirt for himself.

Hamilton told Allen and the institute director that Black 14 Philanthropy was about to receive official nonprofit status.

“Is there more we can do together?” he asked.

Seeking constructive reconciliation

Two weeks after the dinner, Hamilton was in Salt Lake City with his son and their wives, meeting three of the church's apostles — Elder Gary E. Stevenson, Elder Ronald A. Rasband and Elder Dale G. Renlund — as well as Elder Nielsen.

“When I first met Mel we had this instant connection,” Elder Nielsen said, “because I’m a quarterback and he’s an offensive lineman, and we know how closely you have to work together to accomplish a common goal, and that is to win. So I thought to myself, ‘Well, how do we make this a win-win situation?’ I didn’t know about the Black 14 Philanthropy foundation.”

The Hamiltons visited Welfare Square and attended the church’s semiannual general conference.

“The Black 14 always wanted to make something useful out of the incident in 1969,” Hamilton said. “We didn’t want to take on a bitter and negative connotation. We wanted our legacy to be more than a confrontation. We wanted to do something to improve the look of our legacy by helping other people.”

The Black 14 already had established an endowment for scholarships for African American students. They had launched the Black 14 Social Justice Summer Institute. Then the connection between Hamilton and Elder Nielsen facilitated this week’s deliveries.

The label on each pallet of food says, “University of Wyoming Black 14; Mind, Body, and Soul Initiative; Donation in partnership with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

Feeding thousands

Monday’s food delivery to the Cathedral Home for Children in Laramie will be split between the home and the University of Wyoming’s food pantry for needy students.

The 20,000 shelf-ready pounds of food will last for months at the Cathedral Home, which houses 40 children ages 10 to 17, said Andy Olson, the home’s food program manager.

“I can’t even fathom it,” he said. “This is like the largest donation that we’ve seen at least since I’ve been there, which has been a couple years. To be part of the union of the Black 14 and Latter-day Saints working together to give back to the community makes us feel overwhelmed. We’re really excited and honored to be part of this. It’s something we don’t take lightly.”

On Tuesday, a truck arrived in Denver, where Griffin was on hand, and another at the Wind River Indian Reservation east of Jackson, Wyoming.

The Catholic Charities operation in the Archdiocese of Denver doesn’t have a dock big enough to handle its full truckload of supplies. Instead, the truck will unload at the Salvation Army, where the pallets were to be broken down by Latter-day Saint missionaries for delivery to six local food banks and at-risk housing locations with 900 residents.

“We are truly blessed and humbled by this gift,” said Hahn, the manager at Denver Catholic Charities, which in the past has distributed truckloads of frozen turkeys donated by the Latter-day Saints and last year participated in their Light the World campaign.

The rest of the truckloads are headed to pantries near other living members of the Black 14 — Baltimore; Battle Creek, Michigan; Boys Town, Nebraska; Charleston, South Carolina (near Hamilton’s home); Pittsfield, Massachusetts; and Wilmington, North Carolina.

Promoting respect for all God’s children

The 11 living players are in their early 70s. In addition to Griffin, Grimes, Hamilton and McGee, they are Jay Berry, Tony Gibson, Ron Hill, Willie Hysaw, Ivie Moore, Joe Williams and Ted Williams. Joe Williams was a running back for the 1972 Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys.

“You still can feel their pain and their disappointment in the betrayal, but it’s also plain that they just had this desire to make it all

mean something,” said Elder Michael Jones, an Area Seventy for the church who has worked with Hamilton. “I love that they’ve persisted in their goodness, and now they’re seeing the fruits. I’m hoping other people will see there is something we can do to reach out and do better.”

Last month, the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instructed members to be leaders in stamping out racism.

“I grieve that our Black brothers and sisters the world over are enduring the pains of racism and prejudice,” President Russell M. Nelson said during the church’s international general conference. “Today, I call upon our members everywhere to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice. I plead with you to promote respect for all of God’s children.”

His first counselor, President Dallin H. Oaks, added that Latter-day Saints “must do better to help root out racism,” especially in the United States. He followed that message with another at BYU, where he asked students to heed President Nelson’s call.

“The Black 14 are people we want to partner with and learn from and grow with, especially in light of what we just received from President Nelson and President Oaks,” Elder Jones said. “There’s an opportunity to do good and to work together. It’s been really a unique and special experience to both be an observer and be involved as I have. It’s just really been a gift for me.”

Building lasting legacies

Griffin’s grandmother always taught him that God works in mysterious ways, which he has seen proved true again and again.

“Now we’re partners with the church,” he said. “We might have different faiths, but it’s all about humanity and how we can reach out, how we can work together. I’m grateful for this opportunity, for both us and the church.”

Allen, the church’s Laramie stake president, described Griffin and the other members of the Black 14 as enduring examples.

“It says a lot about who they really were as young men to have the courage to stand up in 1969, and then it says more that they continue to strive for the less fortunate and those stuck in poverty,” Allen said.

The partnership is a modern tale of forgiveness, Elder Nielsen said as he watched the food loaded on trucks last week at the Bishops’ Central Storehouse in Salt Lake City: “We can forgive and move forward. It’s up to each one of us to make that decision. In this particular case, Mel has made that decision and those members of the Black 14 that are with him have made that decision, which puts us in a position where we can really help them. That’s why we have what we have here today.”

“Especially now,” Hamilton said, “in this climate that we have, this polarizing climate of love and hate, I don’t want to be on that hateful side, and I don’t want people to think that the Black 14 is on that hateful side. We certainly are not.”

Griffin said the joint food deliveries will become legacies of the Black 14 and the church.

“It’s gratifying to us to have the ability to give back at our ages,” Griffin said. “Thank God I’m still here to be able to experience this. It’s a wonderful day.

“We’re moving mountains of food, and those mountains of food are going to be consumed by people who need it. For us to be able to do that, that just makes me happy,” Griffin said. “In street vernacular, that’s a lot of grub!”

Truckloads.

Trent Toone contributed to this report.

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