



# **Happy birthday, James Killion! Local hero would be 100 this Sunday**

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
May 21 2018 12:15 PM



ALTON - James Killion, Jr. was known as a bridge-builder throughout his beloved Alton.

Killion brought Oakwood into the community at large, bringing the mostly-black neighborhood much-needed amenities, such as water and sewer systems through the city. He also was a part of the heroic force landing on the beaches of Normandy during D-Day, and came home to Alton with a heart for community, especially working with

young people. During most of his adult life, Killion was a beacon for Alton's youth and an active bridge-builder. He had a special passion for bringing Alton's black community into the fold, his son, James Killion III said Monday. Killion would be celebrating his 100th birthday this Sunday, May 25, if he were still alive.

Today, James Killion, Jr. is remembered by most Altonians with his name being placed on the park on Salu Street. James Killion III said the community support of naming that park in honor of his father shows Alton has come a long way since his father was blazing trails and bridging gaps.

"I am proud of what Alton has accomplished," James Killion III said. "I have never shied away from referencing Alton as home. As an individual, I am also happy for Alton. It's had some dark moments in its history, but it has come a long way. It shows in the way the community supported Killion Park and naming the gym after George Terry at Lewis and Clark and the fact they have a library in a block of Salu named after James Bailey. It shows Alton has come a long way and is genuine about wanting to be a diverse community."

But, Alton has not always been in such hopeful straits. Even in the times James Killion, Jr. was working at Laclede Steel at its prime as a union officer, race relations were strained in Alton. While Killion was trying to bring black folks in Alton into the public spotlight with good deeds and community activism, Elijah Conley, who built many of the brick streets in Alton, was attempting to integrate the Alton School System with threats of state funding cuts. His efforts were met with a cross-burning.

"I was about six years old when that cross-burning happened," James Killion III said. "The men in the community got together to protect us. We do have a history here."

He said his father was related to the Conleys, adding such strife did not deter him from his dedication to making Alton a better place. Conley left Alton with a ruined line of credit and a destroyed career for his efforts to make it a more integrated place.

James Killion III also left Alton, but upon his graduation from high school. He said he made himself a career outside of Alton and has returned to the area after retiring. He now lives in St. Louis County and is involved in community efforts in Alton such as working on the Miles Davis statue and the now-annual Alton Wine and Jazz Festival. He is also a member of the Alton Black Alumni Association, which hosts reunions every two years.

"We try to bring successful people back to Alton to be mentors, coaches and role models for kids who may be struggling," he said of the association. "We have a lot to offer and give. It's like the evolution of a circle for my dad's legacy."

As for the park named in his father's honor, James Killion III said the continued upkeep and emphasis on keeping the park well-maintained and clean greatly honors his father's legacy. He said creating such a public space for young people keeps in pace with James Killion, Jr.'s missions. Not only is it a space for children, but for people of all ages now.

“Rather than divisiveness, my father would always look for common ground to build momentum for the community and overall betterment of Alton,” James Killion III said. “Loving Alton was in his DNA. His parents were the same way. His mother, my grandmother, would always march in the Memorial Day Parade with my father and his brother, Harold. They were both veterans and very patriotic. He wanted to make Alton a better place for his children and grandchildren.”

While James Killion III, and much of Alton, knows there is more work to be done, he said he is pleased with the city's progress so far as he prepares for the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of his father this weekend.