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## Cobb native Allen Mendenhall talks personal collection of essays titled 'Of Bees and Boys'

Staff reports 10 hrs ago



Allen Mendenhall

Q: What is your connection to Cobb County?

A: Cobb County is home. I live now in Auburn, Alabama, but most of my family is still in Cobb County where I grew up. I'm a product of the Cobb School District, having attended Mt. Bethel, Timber Ridge, Dickerson, and Walton. My little second-grade handprints are, as far as I know, still on the wall at Timber Ridge. I was in the first class of students there and likely remain the only student to have sung the Monkeys in the cafeteria during an evening of schoolwide karaoke.

I remember when Upper Roswell was a two-lane road. Then it was widened, massive oak trees were cut down, a driving range called the Sport Tee was built where the Avenue shopping center currently is, and houses and subdivisions started popping up everywhere.

I played little-league baseball at Fullers Park. I was an all-star until the day I had to bat against Bryan Wilson. His fastball was so mean that I saw nothing but a flash of wind leave his hand and then heard the sound of a pop in the catcher's mitt. Apparently I had swung and missed, but the swing must have been involuntary. There'd been no time to think. I struck out and decided right then that I preferred basketball and golf.

I still dream about playing basketball for Walton. In the waking world, I never made it beyond JV, but in my sleep I relive my varsity tryouts and win the approbation of Coach Wilson. Sometimes I jerk myself awake at night while driving to the hoop for a layup, and a profound sadness sets in as I slowly realize the reality that I've been dreaming and I don't really inhabit that young and agile body anymore.

I was much better at track and cross-country. In fact, back in 2000, this newspaper named me the male "Athlete of the Week" after I won the Brookwood Walton Stage Race. I don't run anymore unless someone's chasing me.

Q: Tell our readers about your book.

A: "Of Bees and Boys" is a collection of essays about my personal experiences. As a Southerner, I'm inclined to tell stories, and these are my stories. The first two essays, or substantial portions of them, take place right here in Cobb County. They're about growing up, facing cancer, reading, teaching in prison, my grandfather, and other things.

Q: What inspired this book?

A: Each essay is different. If there's a single through-line, it's the need to slow down and contemplate the profundities of everyday life. The opening essay, from which the book takes its title, is an attempt to make sense of what at first blush seems like an ordinary experience involving children and insects. The chapter about prison teaching is an attempt to explain to myself, more than anyone else, why I chose to teach prisoners and what I was hoping to get out of that experience. I guess you could say that my own experiences, as I understood them, inspired the essays.

Q: How long did it take you to write it? Describe that process.

A: I didn't have a deliberate process of writing these essays, in part because I didn't know I was writing a book. I chose to write each essay for different reasons. I wrote about having cancer, for example, because that was a frightening but enlightening experience that I needed to contemplate. Writing helps me to organize my thoughts and understand my feelings. So whenever I'm confused, bothered, or moved, I write about what I'm feeling to try to figure out why I'm feeling it and whether there's a deeper meaning to be examined.

Q: What is your career background?

A: I've always straddled two fields: law and teaching. I have two graduate degrees in law and two graduate degrees in English. At some point I managed to marry my legal and literary interests: I'm now an associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law in Montgomery, Alabama, and the executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty. I've practiced law in Atlanta and taught at several schools, both in the United States and abroad, and in several disciplines — from law and business to literature and the humanities. I'm passionate about ideas and immerse myself in them to escape the fleeting urgency of transitory political conflicts.

Q: How can people purchase your book?

A: "Of Bees and Boys" is available at my publisher's website: [www.reddirtpress.net/books](http://www.reddirtpress.net/books). It's also available on Amazon and on Barnes & Noble's website. It's getting picked up by more bookstores and online booksellers by the day, so a quick online search should reveal several ways of purchasing it.