

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



## Ernest "Ernie" Eugene Barnes, Jr. (July 15, 1938 – April 27, 2009) "Iconic Artist"



Ernest "Earnie" Eugene Barnes, Jr. was born July 15, 1938 in Durham, North Carolina, to Ernest E. Barnes, Sr. and Fannie Mae Geer. Ernie grew up in an area called "The Bottom" - a community near the Hayti District of the city.

As a child, he would accompany his mother to work, at the home of a prominent white Durham attorney. His mother encouraged Ernie to study the attorney's art books and listen to classical music, while she worked. By the time he entered first grade, he recognized the works of art masters like Toulouse-Lautrec, Delacroix, and Michelangelo.

His stocky build often made him the target of bullies in school, so Ernie kept to himself and his sketchbooks. A chance meeting with a gym teacher inspired Ernie to also focus on his physical health by weightlifting. By his senior year at Hillside High School, Ernie became captain of the football team and state champion in the shot put. He graduated high school in 1956 with 26 athletic scholarship offers.

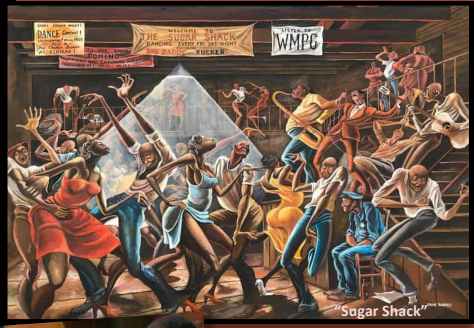
Ernie attended North Carolina College at Durham (now North Carolina Central University, HBCU), located directly across the street from his high school. There, he majored in art on a full athletic scholarship. Ernie played tackle and center at NCC. In December 1959 Ernie was drafted in the 10th round by the then-World Champion Baltimore Colts. Ernie would go on to play for the New York Titans, San Diego Chargers and the Denver Broncos. While playing with Denver, Ernie was often fined for stopping to sketch during team meetings and during breaks in the Broncos games. Ernie was keenly aware of the players around him - the exaggerated shapes and posture of the players in movement. His artistic eye captured the black athletes in a unique, larger than life, way. His Denver teammates called him "Big Rembrandt." Coincidentally, Ernie and the famous Dutch artist share the same birthday. One of the sketches that Ernest was fined \$100 for, sold for \$1,000.00 years later.



In 1965, after a football career-ending injury, Ernie was invited to the NFL owners meeting in Houston where his artwork caught the eye of NY Jets owner, Sonny Werblin. Sonny later paid for Ernie to bring his paintings to New York, where he had three art critics evaluate his work. The art critics were blown away by the larger than life paintings that Ernie created. In 1966, Ernie had his very first (and solo) art exhibition at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City. In a way to honor his father who had recently passed, Ernie framed his work in distressed wood frames. All of his painting's sold.



In the early 1970's, Ernie painted one of his most iconic paintings to date - "Sugar Shack." The painting was a direct interpretation from a childhood memory in Durham, NC. It was most notably featured on the television show Good Times in the fourth season. Ernie made an appearance on the show as well in 1975-76.



Most of the character JJ's paintings, were, in fact, Ernie's artwork.

In 1976, "Sugar Shack" with minor changes (adding names of singles on the album to the hanging banners), also became the album cover for Marvin Gaye's, I Want You album. The original artwork is reportedly owned by Eddie Murphey. Ernie Barnes and his artwork has been featured in numerous art exhibits, album covers, and television shows and to this day,



adorns the halls of colleges, chapels, renowned art galleries and museums.

In October 2007, Ernie's final public art exhibition - The National Football League and Time Warner sponsored "A Tribute to Artist and NFL Alumni Ernie Barnes" - showed in the place his art career began, New York City.



On April 27, 2019, Ernie Barnes died after battling myeloid leukemia. His ashes were scattered in his hometown of Durham, near the site of his childhood home and some spread near the ocean in California.



In the 2016, the "Sugar Shack" appeared in Southside With You, a movie detailing the life of Barack and Michelle Obama.

