

Wyoming County Essay

Nestled in the hills of wild and wonderful West Virginia, Wyoming County serves as a home to many talented people. From actor Bernie Casey to professional boxer Christy Martin, natural talent is teeming with the citizens of our county and has been for years. Though society encourages the pursuance of more traditional money-making jobs, many break the glass ceiling and test out the waters in the entertainment industry. From wrestling to acting to governmental roles, many native West Virginians who were born in Wyoming County have thrived beyond the border, but it is their southern West Virginia roots that shaped them into who they are today.

Born in Wyco, West Virginia, on June 8th, 1939 to mother Flossie (Coleman) Casey and father Frank Leslie Casey, Bernie Casey grew up in the hills of Wyoming County. As Casey grew up, his family decided to move to Columbus, Ohio, where Casey attended East High School and went on to attend Bowling Green State University on a football scholarship, where he returned years later to earn a master's in fine arts (Barnes, 2017). After graduating, Casey went on to participate in 8 NFL seasons: six with the 49ers and two with the Rams. After his participation in the NFL, Casey decided to become more involved in the world of acting, directing, producing, and even painting and poetry.

“When that sojourn is over and you're 32 or something, when most people are just beginning to understand who they are, what they can do and what life is all about, you have been considered in the world of sports a dinosaur [...] From that point on, it's a downward spiral into the abyss of non-consideration and obscurity and a lot of other things that they never recover from. I want to think in my instance, it's the beginning. There's a lot of life left after 32.” Casey once said in a program for NFL Films, as he prepared to portray Chicago Bears player J.C. Caroline in the 1971 ABC telefilm *Brian's Song*, the heart-wrenching tale about the friendship between Brian Piccolo and Gale Sayers (Barnes, 2017). Casey made his movie debut in *Guns of*

the Magnificent Seven, and then went on to be in multiple shows and films, such as *Hit Man* (1970), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Black Gunn* (1972), *Maurie* (1973), and more. According to The Hollywood Reporter, after years of serving as a board chairman and being an advocate for arts education, Casey received an honorary doctorate degree from The Savannah (Georgia) College of Art and Design (Barnes, 2017).

Though his most involved pastime after leaving the NFL was through media and film, Bernie Casey was also an avid painter and poet. In an article published by Sports Illustrated Staff in the Sports Illustrated Vault, the author makes it clear that his work is worth reading and tells their audience repeatedly to “go buy it.” (*Poet, painter and wide receiver, the Rams' Bernie Casey sees people one at a time*, 1969). In terms of Casey’s paintings, TheHistoryMakers.org notes that “in 1971, Casey produced an independent film entitled Bernie Casey: Black Artist, which focused on his thoughts and observations as a painter.” (*Bernie Casey's Biography*, 2022) Casey went on to produce more than 30 solo art exhibitions before his death on September 19, 2017.

Another product of Wyoming County that rose to fame was famous boxer Christy Martin. Born as Christy Salters on June 12, 1968, in Mullens, West Virginia, Martin grew up being a catcher in Little League baseball. After playing basketball at Mullens High, Martin decided to continue both her sportsmanship and education at Concord College in Athens, earning a B.S. in Education. While boxing may not stray too far away from the physical requirements of basketball, Martin never thought she’d become a professional boxer. According to the Women’s Boxing Archive Network, she “entered and won a Tough Woman competition on a dare. Despite having little ring experience, she was amazed by how much she enjoyed herself.” (*Women's Boxing: Christy Martin Biography*, 2009) After graduating in 1991 with her degree, she and her

mother Joyce investigated a ring career for her, where they found trainer Jim Martin at a gym in Bristol, Tennessee. Through Jim Martin, Christy was able to test the waters of professional wrestling and did enjoy it, and later went on to marry Jim.

While the majority of Christy's social fame derives from her natural talent in boxing, she gained a lot of social traction as a result of the infamous dispute between her and her husband in November of 2010. Since she was a child, Christy knew she was attracted to women and thus identified herself as a lesbian, however, going into an industry where homosexuality was not appreciated, she was forced to hide it. After marrying her trainer Jim Martin, many arguments between them ignited and Jim often used her sexuality as a form of extortion; he threatened to tell all her fans that she was attracted to women if she treated him wrong or told the public of his mistreatment. As a result of the disarray that had been increasing for years, Jim attempted to murder Christy in November 2010 by shooting and stabbing her multiple times. Christy fled the scene and survived this dispute, and Jim was found in a hideout one week after the event occurred. He was charged with first degree attempted murder and was held without bail, until jury selection began on April 23, 2012 (*The life and near death of prizefighter Christy Salters-Martin*, 2021).

Martin's life-changing murder attempt left southern West Virginians and the rest of the world stunned. As a result, many news articles, book segments, and even documentary films were made to tell Martin's story, such as *Untold: Deal with the Devil* on Netflix. Christy is still alive and well today and came out as lesbian in 2010. Martin has been referred to as a "hero" because of her survival of the domestic abuse by her homophobic husband.

The stories of these two separate individuals connect in many ways: initially by their history as citizens of Wyoming County, but also by their perseverance through social, mental,

and physical challenges after leaving West Virginia. Whether it be attempted murder, homophobia, or racism, each of these celebrities and more have used the perseverance and effervescence instilled in them as ancestors of Wyoming County to succeed and thrive.

References

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