

Back in the days when Marvin Gaye was crooning his way to the top of the music charts, the Fonz was making young ladies swoon on "Happy Days" and Muhammad Ali was serving up vicious TKO's every six months, the average young man in his mid-twenties couldn't fathom the idea of dying young. The same can be said for William B. Jones Jr., a 25-year-old fun-loving Tennessean enjoying the prime of his life. His last night roaming this soil was certainly one to remember.

It's another nippy 1976 November evening in Stanton, Haywood County, Tenn. and William B. Jones is barreling down the 76 highway on his way home from work because the most exciting time of the year is here. A certain electricity is in the air and championship aspirations seem to be the most popular topic of conversation around the community, which can only mean one thing: hoops are back in town. It's opening night for girls' varsity basketball at Haywood High School, and Jones's two younger sisters 17-year-old Virginia and 16-year-old Teresia just happen to be on the roster. After stopping by the house to change clothes, Jones plans to head straight to the gym to watch his siblings dominate the hardwood. Little did Jones know that these would be the very last moments of his time on earth.

Still heading down the two-lane road, Jones decides that the vehicle in front of him is driving a little too slow. In an attempt to go around the car, Jones shifts to the other lane where oncoming traffic could potentially meet him head-on. Before he can get ahead of the driver in front of him, he sees a life-sized delivery truck coming and slides back into the lane behind the car.

While executing this maneuver, he goes over a little too far and slips into the gravel and shrubbery on the side of the road, forcing his car to swerve right back into the path of the truck, which was now closer than ever. Unable to react fast enough, Jones is hit by the truck, breaking his neck and ultimately ending his life, leaving friends, family and an entire community in a state of shock.

“We were waiting for him at the house, getting ready to go to the game when our neighbor knocked on the door to tell us that he’d been in an accident,” recalls younger sister Virginia of the fateful night. “I don’t remember much about the funeral, but I remember the town’s reaction,” says Jones of the ugly reality of her brother’s passing. “Everybody was devastated. It was like the whole community got silent. Everybody was just down.”

Naturally, their mother, Alma Queen Jones was the most visibly distraught.

“I was 17 years old at the time, and when you’re 17, you don’t really see death like you do when you’re in your adult years,” says Virginia. “So when my mother was screaming and crying, I would try to console her and tell her that he was just going away for a while and that daddy was going to bring him back.”

As the first born of 11 children to William B. and Alma Queen Jones, he was naturally named after his father. He had seven sisters and three brothers, for whom he had a strong love and undying loyalty. Though his government name was William, he grew up going by a different moniker: “Junior.” Jones was born June 8, 1951 in Stanton, Haywood County, Tenn., a rural community low on income, but rich in soul and tradition.

"It was a quiet little town," remembers Virginia, a long time resident. "You could leave your car on and nobody would steal it. I loved it. It was quiet, people were humble and there was no crime or anything like that back then. Everybody looked out for each other."

Growing up, Jones had many friends and was loved by virtually everyone he came in contact with. Jones was described as a free-spirit, with a lively, infectious personality and a knack for making people laugh.

"People just loved him. He was one of those rare kind- hearted people who would do anything for you if he could," says Virginia. "He just did so many things for the community. He would fix cars and those kinds of things. People came to him with their personal problems. He wasn't hard to get along with at all."

Near the end of the segregation era, Jones attended Carver High School in Brownsville, Tenn., where he ran track and soon became known for his athletic ability as well. After graduating in 1970, Jones moved to Nashville, Tenn. After a brief stay there, being the family man that he was, he came back to live with his parents in Haywood County, a mere 15-to-20 minute drive from Brownsville. In Brownsville, he landed a job with Lasco Industries and quickly became a supervisor. What will be remembered most about Jones is his work ethic, countenance and delightful aura. He was the type of person who was never without a smile and a kind word.