SAN ANGELO, Texas — Although he never received worldwide recognition like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln or George Washington Carver, former San Angeloan Carl Ray Johnson left an indelible mark and served as an inspiration for those around him in his short lifetime.

Nearly 40 years after Johnson died in a car crash, author and professional speaker Byrd Baggett is spreading the gospel of his former University of Texas track teammate and good friend who persevered through racism and persecution before he died at age 23.

Baggett, who has written 15 books, captivated a near-capacity audience at the San Angelo Texas Exes luncheon Thursday at Zentner's Daughter Steakhouse. He told the poignant story of a pioneer who paved the way for future black athletes in the early days of integration.

While Americans are celebrating Black History Month during February, family, friends and fellow San Angelans gathered to listen to Johnson's story. It was an emotional celebration filled with wisdom, humor and sadness.

After competing in athletics for Carver Elementary, Blackshear Junior High and Central High School, Johnson earned a scholarship at UT in the late 1960s. He was the only black person on the Longhorns' track team and he helped turn the sprint relay team into one of the best in the nation.

The Carl Johnson Recreation Center in San Angelo is named in his honor.

During a trip to a track meet in La Grange, Longhorns coach Jack Patterson was told that only the white athletes could eat in the diner and Johnson would have to have his meal with the cooks in the kitchen. Patterson told the restaurant owner that if he wouldn't allow Johnson to eat with the rest of the team, they weren't going to dine there. The owner changed his mind.

Baggett told Thursday's audience how hard the news of Johnson's death in 1973 hit him.

But long after his passing, Johnson continues to be an inspiration to those who knew him and many more people who have since learned his story.

A new scholarship has been created in his honor — the Carl Johnson Spirit Award. A Central High School graduate will be the first recipient of the scholarship in May.
"I know Carl's smiling because his life story was keeping hope alive," Baggett said. "And this scholarship's going to keep hope alive for other student-athletes from his high school."

Baggett said Johnson opened doors for blacks who followed.

"He's not a celebrity known worldwide, but I think that's how Carl would've wanted it," Baggett said. "And if Carl could've continued with youth and giving people hope, he would've done great things. But he's still going to do great things.

"He's a hero here in San Angelo and Texas and I'm hopeful that a lot more people across the country are going to hear about Carl's story."

When Baggett first came to San Angelo and saw the Carl Johnson Rec Center, it touched him to see how his good friend has been recognized in his hometown.

He got the same kind of feeling Thursday during his presentation.

"Goose bumps are angels tickling you on the back and I've had tons of them today," Baggett said. "It got very emotional. He accomplished more in 23 years than most people accomplish in a life because Carl realized it wasn't about him. It was about serving others."

If he were alive today, Baggett said Johnson still would be passing his baton, inspiring youngsters, especially fellow blacks, to choose the right path and make a difference in the world.

"The month before he died he was working with youth in East Austin," Baggett said. "I think Carl would've been working in San Angelo in social work, mentoring, challenging youth to not quit before the blessing.

"I think that's his greatest legacy. He didn't quit and the adversity he faced I couldn't even comprehend. His spirit burns eternal and that's it. He's going to continue to touch hearts and that's exciting. I will not speak to a group unless I can share his story."

Before Baggett's presentation, the Rev. Floyd Crider opened the luncheon with a prayer, followed by a poem that fellow San Angeloan Bobby Lacy wrote in honor of his good friend.

Max Parker, the president of the San Angelo Texas Exes chapter, said Lacy's poem was a hard act to follow.

"No offense to Byrd, but we could've closed the meeting right there," Parker said. "I think everybody would've left saying, 'I got my money's worth.'"

Parker, whose children played volleyball and basketball in the Carl Ray Johnson Recreation Center, didn't know the story behind the name until he read an article that Baggett wrote about his former teammate.
"This was a story of perseverance and persecution, but he got through it," Parker said. "It's special to me because I was at the University of Texas during those times.

"I graduated in 1973 with my business degree before I went to law school. I watched the track team. This is before I ever thought about moving to San Angelo. I had no idea who Carl Ray Johnson was. I was a walk-on on the football team in 1971 and there was only one African-American football player on the team, Julius Whittier."

Parker thinks Johnson may have been one of the first blacks to receive an athletic scholarship at UT.

"These were very different times," Parker said. "In some ways, Carl was the Jackie Robinson of black athletes at the University of Texas."

San Angeloan Lena Mae Johnson, Carl's mother, said her son would've been deeply moved by Thursday's ceremony.

"It obviously would've meant everything in the world to him," she said. "His purpose was to help people. He was a lot of fun."