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Jeff Copeland, professor and head of the English language and literature department at the University of Northern Iowa, spent one year researching background and six months writing "Olivia's Story: The Conspiracy of Heroes Behind Shelley v. Kraemer."

UNI prof's latest book is 'every author's dream come true'

By MELODY PARKER

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CEDAR FALLS — Jeff Copeland was at a proverbial fork in the road.

He could continue researching a book about Olivia Perkins' teaching career at Charles Sumner High School, the first African-American high school built west of the Mississippi River, where her students included Chuck Berry, Dick Gregory, Tina Turner and Arthur Ashe. Or he could follow the urging of Perkins' family and "write Olivia's story" about a woman who risked her personal safety in the 1940s to fight for the right for people of color to own property.

Copeland fell in love with Perkins' voice in her letters to husband Sgt. Inman Perkins, an Iowa-raised African-American soldier and subject of Copeland's recent book, "Inman's War: A Soldier's Story of Life in a Colored Battalion in WWII." The nonfiction book received five national award nominations and is being made into a movie by Storylounge Productions, affiliated with Fox and Universal studios.

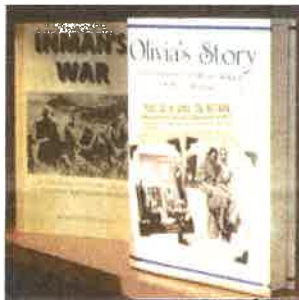
"Olivia's voice was incredibly funny and beautiful. When I started writing the initial story about

her teaching career, it was as dry as a corn cob left out in the sun. I found out about her involvement leading up to 'Shelley v. Kraemer,' the landmark 1948 Supreme Court decision that abolished racially-based housing. Then her cousin offhandedly asked, 'Are you going to write about the murder?' I said, 'I beg your pardon ... what murder?' I interviewed another relative who asked if I was going to write about the murder and I went through the details with her and she said, 'Not that one, the other one,'" Copeland recalls.

Yet another source told him about a third murder.

"Bodies were stacking up like cordwood. Here's the fork in the road, I thought, and it was a no-brainer. These murders directly relate to the story and while they aren't the main focus, the murders are of major importance to what happens to the characters in the story and how the story unfolds," Copeland explains.

"Olivia's Story: The Conspiracy of Heroes Behind Shelley v. Kraemer" was released this week, published by Paragon House. Copeland is a professor and head of the English language and literature department at the University of Northern Iowa.



"I call this every author's dream come true. Olivia was one of five people involved in the caper or ruse or misdirection, whatever you'd call the action done to help get rid of racially restrictive real estate covenants in St. Louis. The impact of the Supreme Court decision was felt across the country. What Olivia and the others did had an impact in real social change."

In 1940s St. Louis, people of color could purchase property in an area called the Ville, but were limited by real estate covenants to renting property outside those boundaries. The city was mushrooming as defense plants expanded and adequate housing was nearly impossible to find. Olivia Perkins joined with four other people to try to purchase property in a whites-only

area.

"What happened next was beyond my wildest imagination. In writing this I had to be careful because there is no statute of limitations on murder. All of these are unsolved murders, but I have an inkling of what happened. I leave it up to the reader to decide who is the guilty party," says Copeland, a native of St. Louis.

All of the details in "Olivia's Story" are true, gathered from archives, records centers, letters and legal documents. Copeland spent one year on background research. It took six months to write the book. "I wanted it to read better than an episode of 'Law & Order.' I had all the transcripts and the jackpot — people who were physically in the courtroom and could give eyewitness accounts. It made history come alive."

Copeland also concentrated on getting to know Olivia's personality and mannerisms through interviews with family and friends, fleshing out her character from the one-dimensional person he first met in her correspondence.

"Olivia was such a kind and caring person that what she did didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was, based upon what hap-

Details

"Olivia's Story: The Conspiracy of Heroes Behind Shelley v. Kraemer," Jeff Copeland

- 365 pages
- Published by Paragon House
- Copies are \$19.95 each, available at University Book & Supply in Cedar Falls, Barnes and Noble and book Web sites.
- Copeland is author of "Inman's War: A Soldier's Story of Life in a Colored Battalion in WWII," "Speaking of Poets" and about 23 English language arts textbooks for kindergarten through college students.

pened in 'Inman's War' that she did something of this magnitude for the whole country. I didn't see that coming."

Originally, the author found about 150 of Inman and Olivia Perkins' letters tied in packets, stored in a battered suitcase he purchased at a flea market for \$30 nearly a decade ago. The correspondence dated from Perkins' service in the 449th Colored Signal Construction Battalion from 1942-1944.

Copeland will begin a national book tour this month, mostly on weekends. This summer he plans to visit Europe. He also is working on several other books, including one on Mark Twain.