

# Habi chat

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# A decades-long journey of healing

*Book chronicles the rift in Americus High School's class of 1965 over Koinonia and racial equality — and how that divide was bridged over many years*

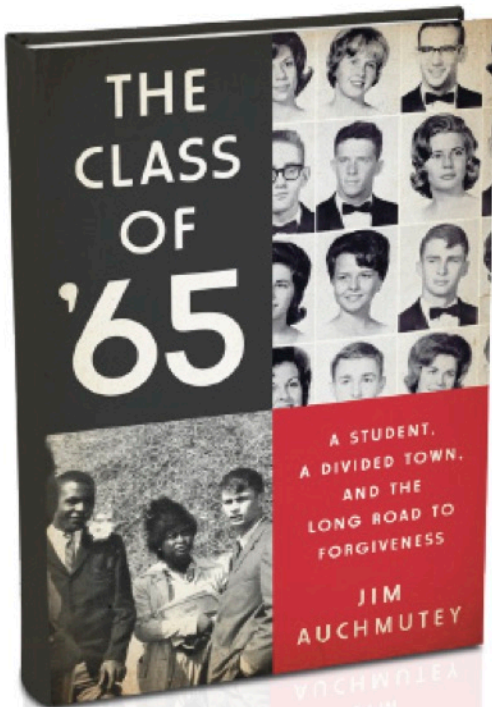
By Teresa K. Weaver

**FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES**, Jim Auchmutey carved out an enviable beat at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, writing richly detailed features about race, religion, history and food, all of which seemed to inform an overarching narrative about what it means to be Southern.

In 2006, he drove 2½ hours southwest to Americus for a story about a high school reunion that has now become the subject of his first book, "The Class of '65: A Student, A Divided Town, and the Long Road to Forgiveness" (Perseus/PublicAffairs).

"When I first reported the story on the reunion of the Class of '65, I knew it was very special," Auchmutey said. "I probably got more reaction to it than any story I ever wrote at the AJC that didn't involve cats."

The book centers on Greg Wittkamper, who grew up at Koinonia, the Christian

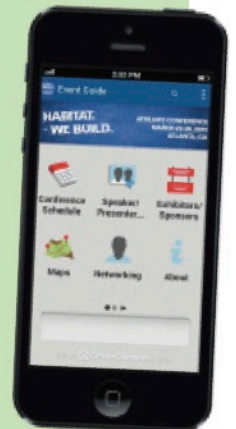


## It's showtime for the 2015 Affiliate Conference

By Phil Kloer

**THE HUM COMING** from the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Atlanta next week will be the nonstop networking of more than 2,200 Habitat representatives from across the United States and around the world as they gather to learn and share at the 2015 Affiliate Conference. In addition to attending some of the 171 sessions, panels and inspirational speeches, many affiliate representatives see the biennial conference as a chance to informally exchange ideas with peers they might not otherwise meet.

With the theme "We Build," the 2015 conference will feature the return of a Habitation worship service at 5 p.m. March 25, the first conference mobile app, and speeches by Paralympic medalist



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Greg Wittkamper (center) and other young people from Americus High School attend a 1965 meeting of the Georgia Council on Human Relations on Jekyll Island, where they received citations for their courage and composure.

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farm community that was the spiritual birthplace of Habitat for Humanity. Now a peaceful part of the rural area, Koinonia and its families were targeted in the turbulent 1950s and '60s for their progressive stands on racial equality, fairness and nonviolence. Bombings, shootings and ongoing threats did little to faze the tight-knit community.

Americus High School refused to admit students from Koinonia until some of the parents took the matter to court. All of this drama made Greg Wittkamper an immediate outcast when he started high school in 1961. And in his senior year, the first year of desegregation, he refused to torment the few black students who enrolled, and thus became nearly as persecuted as they were.

"In everyone's memory, there's something hidden, something dark, something no one wants to think about when the lights go out and sleep won't come," Auchmutey writes in the book. "For Greg, it was Americus High School."

Four decades after graduation, though, something remarkable began to happen. White classmates who had tormented and shunned Wittkamper in their youth tracked him down at home in West Virginia, writing heartfelt letters asking him to come back to Georgia for the reunion.

"Class of '65" is a deeply moving story of reconciliation, of redemption, of the infinite capacity for change, told with unflinching honesty by Wittkamper and four other classmates, including football hero Joseph Logan and homecoming queen Deanie Dudley.

For those young people, like so many others of the era, racism and prejudice weren't so much learned as absorbed.

Auchmutey captures the essence of that internal turmoil when writing about the football star: "For Joseph Logan, the key to the journey was discovering which parts of his heritage were worth honoring and which deserved to be left behind."

Logan and the other three featured classmates ultimately left Americus and broadened their horizons tremendously. But change doesn't require a shift in geography as much as mindset, Auchmutey said.

"The ending of this story is what gives people hope," he said. "You can change. And people can heal and become better." **H**

*Teresa K. Weaver is editorial director at Habitat for Humanity International. A version of this review first appeared in the March issue of Atlanta magazine.*

### MEET THE AUTHOR

Jim Auchmutey will talk about "Class of '65" at 7 p.m. March 31 at the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, followed by a book signing. The event is free and open to the public.