

Civil Rights

I was born in Greensboro in 1947 and grew up in Lumberton NC. That means I was coming of age at a very exciting time. It was a time of the advent of the Civil Rights movement. The excitement of the eloquence of Thurgood Marshall, MLK and Montgomery bus boycott, the sit-in movement in Greensboro, the activism on college campuses, the rhetoric of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and the election of John F. Kennedy. It was also the time of the death of Emmett Till, the challenge of the Little Rock Nine, the Freedom rides, and the death of the Civil Rights workers, and Gov. Orval Furber and George Wallace standing in the doorways to block progress.

Lumberton is quite a place. For those of you who do not know of it, it is located on I-95 between Fayetteville and South Carolina. It is broadly known as being a tri-racial community. At one time it was equally divided among Whites, Blacks and Lumbee Indians. So the places that were segregated - the movie houses, the restaurants, the stores, the water fountains, the schools - were for Whites, Blacks, and Indians. And we got along in our separate societies. But they were not equal.

A glaring example was the Recreation Center. This is the place all of us in South Lumberton went after school. And we were treated to a new building. But the white rec center had a swimming pool. The best we could get was a basketball goal.

So began my activism at age 12 as I circulated a petition that the South Lumberton rec center include a swimming pool. I must tell you today, over 55 years later, that center still does not have a swimming pool. Sometimes progress is very slow.

Even after I moved to Goldsboro in 1962 and joined the NAACP, things did not change quickly. By that time the marches had begun in earnest and the sit-in movement was really growing. We met in the church basement of First African Baptist church and learned the non-violent principles taught by Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). We learned Freedom songs and teamed up with boy-girl partnerships, all high school students under the leadership of Rev. JE Arnett, who I would have sworn looked just like Dr. King, to march in downtown Goldsboro to the Movie Theaters, to the lunch counters of the five and dime stores and to Weil's Department Store. We would get spat upon, ammonia sprayed in our faces, and arrested. But we never gave up on non-violence.

Mrs. Hamilton, whose husband owned the local Funeral Home, started Operation Break Thru, the first African-American run local nonprofit. It was loosely based on Operation Breadbasket, an SCLC initiative that was started in 1962 in Atlanta. Operation Breadbasket was made famous in Chicago by Jesse Jackson who used it for economic empowerment of African Americans there. He, along with his half-brother Noel Robinson, used boycotts, collusion, threats, or any other tools at his disposal to get more African Americans as employees or as owners of these businesses. His methods ultimately put him at odds with SCLC leadership and the Chicago Operation Breadbasket was transformed to People United to Save Humanity (PUSH) with roughly the same goals (and methods). It remains operating today.

My activism with the NAACP earned me a scholarship to NC State. There I was not only met with the inflammatory rhetoric of Jesse Helms and Chubb Sewell on WRAL who called every Negro who not from Raleigh an "outside agitator" or even worse a "communist" for espousing equal rights for people of color. We also found a campus and staff that had yet to embrace integration. Even many Hillsboro Street eateries continued to practice "separate but equal" and rebel yells and confederate flags could be found through campus. Even the team fight song was a rousing "Dixie". But we banded together and we survived. We confronted racism where we found it. And some of us strove to be "militant" even in an environment where we were vastly outnumbered. I must say that Shaw and St. Aug and sometimes North Carolina Central provided welcomed respites. Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown were our new heroes. And Black Panthers showed us unseen bravery and dedication to the community. Afros abounded and you could not pass a brother or a sister who was not reading a black book, or listening to Jazz, or discussing some new thought of Pan-Africanism. The Black Student Movement had begun and Black Studies would soon emerge.

I didn't make it up to the march on Washington, but I was there during the Poor People's campaign. This had been a dream of MLK before he was shot in April. His assassination sent shock waves through the community. Many areas broke out in violent protest, particularly in the larger cities. We had seen quite a few assassinations by then – John Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X - so it should have been a surprise. But it was. After all he was a peaceful man who had practiced non-violence. Certainly he was not a candidate for a violent death. But he was. And we reacted with anger - Until we were subdued by the greater authority.

It wasn't the same without MLK. The Poor People's campaign did not come off well. It rained the whole time but the truth is it was not well organized. People's attention was drawn to the War in Viet Nam or to Women's Rights. They seemed more pressing than Civil Rights. We did have the legacy of the Civil Rights Act (passed in 1964) and the Voting Rights Act (passed in 1965).

We began to see more Black Elected Officials- Congress people, Mayors, School Board Members, State Officials- but progress was still slow. Schools were integrated and combined or closed. Our High Schools and many of the teachers were found inadequate. Our student capabilities were questioned and too many of us dropped out or were kicked out. We had access to goods and services, and public accommodations so many of our businesses closed. We could work at the large corporations or for state government. We could live where we wanted--- so traditional communities were abandoned by those who could afford better. But racism survived and we can still be challenged to prove ourselves worthy.

It has been an interesting 68 years. I have had opportunities I could not imagine being a child growing up in South Lumberton. I have talked with Presidents and Prime Ministers, Senators, Governors, Congress people, and many others that people would consider important. I remain convinced that though some progress has clearly been made, we still have a long way to go before we become the society promised.

The goals of the Civil Rights Movement remain. That is to create a fair and equitable society. We have not arrived at that destination. There is still much work to do. Thank you.

