

Patricia Cole: Living the Civil Rights Movement

by Ukachi Jibunoh

Sometimes the memory of truth can prove too painful to remember, and so we haze it over or even try not to remember at all. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...”¹ These are the words that established the United States of America. That sentiment, however, did not extend to the freed descendants of African slaves brought to America. They would have to fight for every bit of those “unalienable rights” endowed by the Creator.

Patricia Cole, nee Martin, was born on August 17th 1951, in Fort Worth, Texas to African-American parents. Her mother was the first black nurse to work in the open-heart surgery unit of the Harris Methodist Hospital in Fort Worth. As a black child growing up in the south in the 1950s and during the Civil Rights Movement, Patricia learned early on that the simple fact of her skin color – a fact for which she was not responsible any more than she was responsible for the colors of the rainbow – often dictated how non-blacks might relate to her. It seemed to be the determinant factor in the decision of what quality of life she would have, or even whether she would have any life at all. It was a bewildering, unacceptable situation, and the activities of Civil Rights Movement of which her parents were a part of brought that fact home to her. Her father, Columbus Martin, was among the first people to march for voting rights for blacks. Her mother, breaking the color barrier, was the first black nurse in the open-heart surgery unit at the Harris Methodist Hospital in Fort Worth.

Segregated schools were the norm and Patricia Cole who attended Carroll Peak Elementary in Fort Worth, Texas remembers how segregated her school was. They could only get used books from the schools that the white kids attended, and could only have black teachers. In fact, as she puts it “...everything was segregated – schools, buses even public social services.” The debilitating effects of this segregation made the Civil Rights Movement not just inevitable but completely welcome “...we knew a change was coming, and it can only be better than what was.”²

Patricia, taking her cue from her parents, joined the Civil Rights Movement and was an ardent disciple of Martin Luther King Jr, and the Civil Rights Movement in Fort Worth. She remembers, during the fight for desegregation of public places, participating in a sit-in at McCrory’s Five and Dime restaurant in 1964 when she was thirteen years old. During the first week of their sit-in, they were completely ignored. They were not served at all. Then in the second week they were served only water. By

¹ Visiting the rotunda? Leave camera at home.(ARCHIVES)(Brief article). (2010). *Information Management Journal*, 44(3), 5.

² Patricia Cole, interview by author, March 13, 2017.

the third week they were finally served food. She felt hurt and humiliated by the experience. The attitude toward blacks by the rest of society had no basis in any real crime committed by the blacks. Even though high schools and transportation had been legally desegregated before 1967 and 1968 respectively Ms Cole remembers "...it took a long while to take effect because people were too used to the segregation of the [Jim Crow] laws."³

The Civil Rights Movement was a fight against what was "normal" at the time like lynching, blaming people of color for any and everything bad that happened – whether or not they were involved. Whether or not they were anywhere even remotely near the event. In 1972, Patricia Cole and some friends were returning from a day out in when they were attacked by a group of white youths who acted "as though we were responsible for the shooting of Governor George Wallace."⁴

The opportunity to join her parents in the march for Civil Rights gave Ms. Cole a feeling of accomplishment. It brought hope. It gave the people a platform to fight for their basic human rights. Something that every other race took for granted, and which they should have been able to equally take for granted. According to Ms. Cole, "the Civil Rights Movement helped change race relations in America, but these changes are slow, and...acceptance of blacks is difficult."⁵

³ Patricia Cole, interview by author, March 13, 2017.

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