

Winner of the 2016 Living History Essay Contest

Wise Words from Grandma

by Robert G. Peterson

The Civil Rights Era holds within its timeframe a tipping point, or the “straw that broke the camel’s back” for the African American community in the United States. The mistreatment of African Americans had been well rooted in the cultural dialogue since America’s birth, as slaves were transported by the boatload from their homeland to ours in order to perform the labor European settlers did not wish to do themselves. Almost four hundred years later, in 1954, the idea that people of color deserved the same freedoms and rights of white people finally began to provoke serious consideration. Perhaps western culture had finally evolved enough to tune in to progressive modes of thinking that allow us to see others as equals; or perhaps African Americans had finally reached their limit. The Civil Rights Era may have started for different reasons, but it impacted all who lived through it.

I had the privilege to interview a most genuine of primary sources, my grandmother Ellen Boone, who lived in the constant crossfire of racial tension in 1950’s Durham, North Carolina. Her father was Dr. Warren Carr, a true progressive for his time and perhaps ours. He led his community both in prayer, as the head minister at Watts Street Baptist Church, and by setting an example for his community by treating others with love and respect regardless of race or ethnic background. Due to the forward thinking nature of her father in a consciously backward thinking town, Boone recalled being exposed to the explicit raw hatred that spawned from her community’s inability to “love thy black neighbor.”

She remembered “My father’s church was infamous for allowing black people to not only attend his service, but to sit anywhere they liked.” One service, she remembered, was particularly packed and three black gentlemen walked in the door with nowhere to sit. Surrounding establishments would not hesitate to send them out. After carefully examining the pews, they headed towards three empty spaces right in the front row. She saw the look of disgust on many white faces, and she felt a thickening tension in the humid Durham air. Nonetheless, her father delivered his sermon with acceptance in his voice as his African American brethren absorbed his words from the best seat in the house.

These types of occurrences put a target on Dr. Carr as he not only accepted the concepts of desegregation, but also actively implemented them. Boone recalled a brutal memory in which her family was attacked. She recalled “I didn’t hear the blast, I only heard my father as he moved through the house, panicked, searching for the telephone.” Their home had been bombed. Fortunately, her parents had moved the furniture from their bedroom to another room just the night before. Despite my

grandmother's current age of seventy-three, I heard the confused voice of a terrified young girl as she relived the bombing. The attackers were never brought to justice. It is remarkable to note that such a heinous act that left my grandmother emotionally scarred could take place without any legal repercussions. However, the bombers would have to live the rest of their lives knowing that they attacked an innocent family in the name of racism.

The bombing showed that her chances of survival and acceptance would be increased if she would assimilate into racist culture. It would have been understandable for her to compromise her own beliefs and the examples set by her enlightened father in order to fit in with her peers. Yet, his teachings were deeply rooted in her as she adamantly followed in his footsteps, and celebrated people's differences. Boone described herself as being "colorblind," enabling her to cherish and appreciate cultural diversity. Such a phenomenon is unique in that she is able to disregard physical appearances and embrace the cultural differences of the members of her community.

She learned from the best when it came to embracing racial equality. Her recollections translated into clear-cut advice. She counseled other to "Disregard the physical differences of your fellow man and woman, and celebrate their cultural differences with compassion and understanding." Modern America has found itself at a similar crossroads with events like the Ferguson Riots and wide spread racially fueled outbursts of police brutality. We have the unique opportunity to stop this trend because we have something that our 1950's predecessors did not have. History is on our side. We have examples like my great grandfather, Dr. Carr, and my grandmother, Ellen Boone. They have shown us the way. Such a vivid firsthand description of history offers much hope to the future of America. The solution is simple: love thy neighbor.

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