

Acting for Justice

TARGET	ALLY

BYSTANDER	PERPETRATOR

On Cracking White City

The following oral history, recounted by James Farmer Jr., explains how the Committee of Racial Equality (which later became the Congress of Racial Equality) successfully integrated the Jack Spratt Coffeehouse in Chicago in 1941.

We went in with a group of about 20—this was a small place that seats 30 or 35 comfortably at the counter and in the booths—and occupied just about all of the available seats and waited for service. The woman was in charge again. She ordered the waitress to serve the whites who were seated in one booth, and she served them. She ordered the waitress to serve two whites who were seated at the counter, and she served them. Then she told the blacks, “I’m sorry, we can’t serve you, you’ll have to leave.” And they, of course, declined to leave and continued to sit there. By this time the other customers who were in there were aware of what was going on and were watching, and most of these were university people, University of Chicago, who were more or less sympathetic with us. And they stopped eating and the two people at the counter she had served and those whites in the booth she had served were not eating. There was no turnover. People were coming in and standing around for a few minutes and walking out. There were no seats available.

So she walked over to two of the whites at the counter and said, “We served you. Why don’t you eat and get out?” They said, “Well, madam, we don’t think it would be polite for us to begin eating our food before our friends here have also been served.” So a couple of minutes went by and she announced that she would serve the blacks, the Negroes, which was the term used then, in the basement. We, of course, declined and told her we were quite comfortable. She then said, “If all of the Negroes will occupy those two booths in the back we will serve you there.” We declined again. She said, “I’ll call the police.”

The Gandhian Motif

Then I said to her, “Fine, I think that might be the appropriate step.” By the way, we, still following the Gandhian motif, had called the police in advance, being completely open and above board, everything, in notifying the authorities. We called the police department and told them what we were going to do. In fact, we read the state civil rights law to them. They weren’t familiar with that. [Laughs] They assured us that if we followed the pattern which we outlined to them over the phone, there was nothing they could do to arrest us. They’d have no grounds for making an arrest because we were within our rights to insist upon service. And we asked them if they would see that we were served as they were obligated to do by law, but this they would not do. No, they wouldn’t do that, but they wouldn’t arrest us.

HANDOUT: On Cracking White City

Police Arrive

So we said, "Perhaps you should call the police." She did. Two cops came a few minutes later, looked the situation over, said, "Why, lady, what did you call us for? I don't see anybody here disturbing the peace. Everything seems to be peaceful." She said, "Won't you throw these people out on the grounds that we reserve the right to seat our patrons and would serve some of them in the basement?" The cop didn't know. He went to a telephone booth and made a call. I guess he was calling headquarters to see if they could do that. He came out and said, "Nope, sorry, lady, there's nothing in the law that allows us to do that. You must either serve them or solve the problem yourself." And the cops then walked out. On the way out they turned around and winked at us. [Laughs]

We stayed there until closing time and then got up and left and went back the next day, a little bit earlier, and stayed until closing time. And so on. They then tried again to negotiate—without success. We went back in, oh, several more times and tied up the whole afternoon, tied up all the seats. They were doing no business at all.

Finally they cracked. The next time we went in, they served everybody. And accepted money. Did not overcharge us. We then sent an interracial group, a smaller group, in the next day. Everyone was served. We then sent an all-black group in and they were served. We waited a week and sent another black group in, and they were all served. We sent individual blacks in and they were all served without any problem. So we then wrote them a letter thanking them for their change in policy.

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The Music Lesson

by Sarah Stucki

I don't remember the words that were spoken, or if there were any, but I'll always remember his face. His tears. His sobs.

The choir room was extraordinarily noisy. The excitement of a new day was rushing through everyone. There was so much energy in the air. Enough to make lights shine and fires to start miraculously on their own. It was the perfect day for a complete disaster.

Mr. Dunn, the bald, squatty man, lined us up how we sang. The good ones were in the middle, bad ones on the sides, and, of course, his star, his daughter, Brittany, right in front even though she was tall and made it difficult for anyone to be seen behind her.

"All right, class, quiet down." He spoke in his fake, confident voice, the voice that made people squirm and their blood boil.

"Let's begin with scales. Ready and..." He tapped his baton on the music stand. He gripped it as though it held all the power in the world, his power that decided our self-esteem.

"La la la la la la la la." We were running through the non-thought-containing notes. Clearing our throats to reach the high ones. Quietly bowing our heads for the low ones. Laughing when we made a mistake because we knew we were horrible. So did Mr. Dunn.

"Ha ha ha ha." Loud laughter burst from someone to the left of me. I turned to look and see who it was. My face turned red. It was Mark. My crush on him was given away by my bright face. Suddenly, a loud tapping. I whirled around to look at Mr. Dunn pounding on the music stand for us to stop with our scales.

"Who was laughing just now?" His veins stuck out of his stubby neck. Silence. "Who was it?" He struck the stand with his baton. His eyes searched the risers for the guilty party. The person for whom the lecture would be worthy.

I felt his eyes pass over me. I was afraid for Mark because I just knew that Mr. Dunn would figure out it was him. I guess it didn't help much that 59 out of 60 choir students were staring straight at Mark.

"Mark Hubble." His voice boomed throughout the auditorium. "What was so funny, Mr. Hubble? Why don't you share it with the class?" He stared at Mark with a smirk on his face. Mark just stared at his feet. "Excuse me, Mark, are you deaf? What was so funny?"

A mumble came from Mark's serious face. "Nothing," he said.

“Nothing, huh? Well, if it was just nothing, then why don’t you come and show us how well you can sing?” He made this statement as though he were a god. “Come on, Mark. Stand here and sing your scales for the class.” He pointed to a part in front of the music stand.

Mark was a good guy. He obeyed his teachers. He was never mean at all. He was “fortunate” to be at our school because he was from a reservation in Arizona. So, of course, he went to the music stand and stood before his peers. Us.

“You may begin now,” Mr. Dunn spoke bluntly. The piano player began to run through the notes as Mark whispered the scale. “Sing louder, Mark, we can’t hear you.” Mark sang a little louder. Tears began to fall from his eyes. “Mark, you can sing louder. We heard you loudly before when you were laughing.” Mark was crying harder now. Sobs began escaping from him.

He was very embarrassed, and I didn’t blame him for crying. I would have too if Mr. Dunn had treated me like Mark, and I feel today that the only reason he was so mean to Mark was because Mark was Native American.

Mark never finished those scales that day, and he never came back again. I don’t blame him for that either.

Bystander

by Chris Yungenberg

It was about seven thirty at night. Being mid March, it was already dark out. It was a relatively cool night, and it just so happened I was on a date.

You see, the two of us were riding the MAX to Lloyd Center. Just about everyone in our car was about our age, and were most likely like us, and headed to hang at the mall or see a movie.

But unfortunately, unspeakable evil entered the light rail car behind us: Tri-Met fare inspectors. The problem with being stuck with those guys is that neither me nor my date had valid fare.

One of the dudes was short and skinny, with a hoodie under his stupid fluorescent orange vest. He walked past us, to the rear. The second guy was a little taller, but a good deal heavier, and with glasses. He had the same scruffy look with that desperate attempt of looking official. Yes, they were big men in their orange vests.

It's odd, because the second dude didn't start at the front and move back, checking fares. No, he went for one group of young men in particular. I'd like to point out, this guys were the same as everyone else. Teenagers, talking loudly, wearing the kind of clothes you wear on Friday nights.

Well, I guess there was one difference: These three or four guys were black.

He stood in front of them in their seat area. "I need to see your fares, gentlemen." (It wasn't polite "gentlemen". It was said in the way that pisses you off). They all started reaching into pockets, looking nervous. And as luck would have it, one of those poor souls didn't have valid fare. The big guy stood him up, and started yelling at him.

Me and my date exchanged nervous glances. If that happened to him, we don't want to get caught. Fortunately, however, the MAX stopped and we exited. Inspector number two didn't let the poor guy off.

As we walked away, I commented, "Man, those fare checkers are racist!"

Bystander

by Chris Yungenberg

"Yeah, but I least that guy distracted them for us, right?" my date said.

That response sort of...startled me, I guess. It bothers me that we just accept that, and even use it to our advantage.

Chris Yungenberg was a sophomore at Grant High School when he wrote this piece.