

Growing Up Ignorant

Dale Easley's blog

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I recently began reading **Waking Up White** by Debby Irving, and it has reminded me of how ignorant I was growing up. My home was a short distance from Greensboro, NC, the location of the Woolworth's sit-ins. I went to college only 6 miles from the site, yet I made it into my 40s with no awareness of the sit-ins and their importance to the civil rights movement. It was only on a trip with students that stopped at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis that I encountered a mock-up of the Woolworth's counter and began to find out more about that time period. I later asked my mother why we never spoke of it at home. She replied that, "It just wasn't something we talked about."

Mom wasn't unaware of the civil rights movement. In 1969, when I began 4th grade, the local schools were integrated, and mom took a job as a teacher's aide at what had been the black high school. She soon became secretary, where she stayed for over 20 years. Several of the teachers from the high school stayed on to teach at the now-integrated middle school. Mom's boss, the school principle, was a blue-eyed African American, John L. Hairston, a man mom came to respect tremendously, defend strongly, and serve faithfully. Despite growing up in the hills of North Carolina, mom was able to expand her view of the world tremendously by going to work.

In contrast, my dad refused to eat at the same table as blacks, something I later realized that mom struggled with. His worldview would have fit well with a caste system. He once said, "I don't eat with the president of the company [Piedmont Airlines where he worked] and I don't expect blacks to eat with me." The fact that Mr. Hairston was educated and a true gentleman didn't make up for his ethnicity. Years later, I learned that when my paternal grandfather would get drunk, he would tell people that Dad wasn't his son. Dad certainly had no control over his parentage, so it seems like he might have been a bit more accepting of others' heritage. Unfortunately, he was too much a product of his upbringing.

Dad could have gone to college on the G.I. Bill after World War II but said he thought he was too old. He could have also qualified for mortgage assistance. He was unwilling to take out a loan or even own a credit card, having been scarred by the loss of the family farm during the Great Depression. Again, to prove my ignorance, I wasn't aware that most of the benefits of the G.I. Bill were intentionally made unavailable to the million black World War II veterans. Government policies, university quotas, and society-wide discrimination meant

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My education about injustices continues, but nowadays I have focused more on LGBT issues. I grew up when every LGBT person I might have known was in the closet, and I said hurtful, ignorant things about sexual orientation that I wish I could take back. I can't. But I can work to continue to expand civil rights and understanding of each person. I have found that I like nearly everyone when I first meet them, find them irritating and strange after I'm around them for a while, but start liking them again if I get to the point of understanding why they act the way they do. Getting to that point of understanding takes time and effort, something our society often doesn't encourage. (Instead we entertain ourselves with too many distractions and possessions.) But if I want to be able to look back at this stage of my life with fewer regrets than for when I was young, I'd best invest the time and effort.