

The Paperboy

August 24, 2011

This is a story about racism in Lake County in the early 1960s. It's a story that no one wants to hear—white folks are embarrassed by it, and black folks are understandably angry about it. But it happened to me in the days of my youth, and it needs to be told. Now, 50 years have gone by, and the details are burned in my heart—like it was yesterday!

Before I begin, some background information may be helpful. It was before the major Civil Rights legislation of the 60s had been passed, and in my hometown of Tavares, Florida, everything was segregated. Schools, housing, churches, restaurants, and even rest rooms were segregated! But as a child, I had been taught by my parents that there was nothing wrong with black people and certainly nothing to fear about them. I was taught to respect everyone the same, black, white, or whatever their color of skin! I also was aware that many people did not share our views on this subject. Notoriously, the sheriff of Lake County was an extremely BAD racist named Willis V. McCall. In the county court houses, there were restrooms for white men, black men, white women, and black women. Black people were not allowed in “white” restaurants. In the schools, there were “white” schools and “black” schools. We were told and we believed that the schools were “separate but equal.” Very few folks in the white community bothered to look closely enough to see that the “separate” was inherently “UNEQUAL”—that is, until Civil Rights legislation a few years later forced us to see what was really happening in the black schools.

With this brief background, here is my story. I was 10 years old. My father and I were over at Richard Davis' place on New Hampshire Avenue, and as we got in the car to come home, the subject of college came up. Dad told me that I was going to have to work to put myself through college and that good grades in school are worth money when it comes to scholarships.

At the age of 11, I got a small bicycle paper route for the Tampa Daily Times on the west side of Tavares, mostly in the black section of town. Soon after, I acquired a bicycle route for the Leesburg Daily Commercial around the main part of town. A short time later, the Tampa Daily Times went out of business, and I was left with my route of the Leesburg Commercial. I was a pretty good paper boy, if I do say so myself, delivering faithfully in rain or shine. I learned to work with people in a business-like manner, treating everyone with dignity and respect. It was good for me. I was able to earn money from the age of 11—money that I would need to put myself through college.

My Commercial route took me all over Tavares, to within about a block of the Black section over on the East side of town. One day, as I was merrily pedaling my bike down Disston Avenue on the East side of town, a black woman named Toby waved at me from her house a block away. She wanted to know if I would deliver a newspaper to her daily. I was always looking for new customers, so I replied “Yes. Maa'm!” She must have been astonished to hear such a polite reply from a white boy. Word of mouth spread throughout the small neighborhood of about 4 blocks, and before I knew it, I was delivering papers to about 80% of the houses. This was a nice addition to my paper route, and it showed me what happens when you treat people with respect—they usually respond in kind.

At the age of 14, we had driver's education in school in the 9th grade, after which could get a restricted driver's license. At 16, subject to passing the state driving test, we could obtain an operator's license. As I approached the age of 16, I began to talk with my parents about getting a motorcycle. The next day, they took me to Leesburg to look at a car (there were no dealerships in Tavares in those days!), and I bought a new Fiat 600 with my own money.

At about this same time in 1961, a distributor's route became available to me. This route included some rural customers in addition to my own customers. Also, I was responsible to deliver newspapers to a half dozen other paper boys who were under my care. One of these boys was a black boy named Junior Vaughn, who, because he had no bicycle, walked his paper route in the black section on the West side of Tavares.

Since Christmas was coming, it seemed that we might be able to get a bicycle for Junior from the Toys for Tots campaign, conducted through the Lake County Sheriff's Department. On a particular Saturday before Christmas, the high school principals and others involved in education would gather at the sheriff's department to help distribute the toys through the schools. In those days, Tavares had no black school, so all black students from Tavares were bused to Eustis to maintain segregation! I went to Junior's school, Eustis Vocational High School, to request a bicycle for him. The school then sent me to the home of the principal. I distinctly remember my visit with the principal at his own home. He was very cordial and sympathetic to Junior's need for a bicycle, and he promised me that he would do his best to get him a bike.

On distribution Saturday, the toys, including bicycles, were spread out in front of the Sheriff's Office. Principals of schools and volunteers given tags and instructed to take or tag the toys they needed for their respective schools. Unfortunately, because of Sheriff Willis McCall's racist instructions, all of the black principals were told to stand back until the white principals had taken first pick of the toys. I witnessed it myself! The Tavares High School Key Club was assisting in the distribution, so I was there! In fact, I was given some tags and told to "help out"! So I tagged a half dozen bicycles "EVHS"! Later, at the end of the day, the principal and his associates from Eustis Vocational High School collected these bicycles, and Junior finally got his bike. What a privilege it was for a high school kid to be in the right place at the right time to be able to help counter such injustice by the "high sheriff" of Lake County!

In another incident before Christmas that same year, my boss Fred Wegant, circulation manager for the Leesburg Commercial, called me and told me to bring all my boys over to the burger joint (this was before fast food restaurants—there were NO McDonalds and Burger King chains, if you can imagine such a time as this!!) on US 27 in Leesburg on Saturday. They were having a Christmas party! Bring ALL my boys! So, I brought ALL my boys. We were all inside the store, when Mr. Wegant called me aside. Pointing to Junior Vaughn, he said, "Why did you bring that N_____?" I replied, "You said to bring ALL my boys, so that's what I did! I brought ALL my boys!" Wegant replied, "Well, this place is segregated! Get him OUT of here!!" So, I took Junior, pulled my car around to the back of the store, and the two of us sat in the car eating our hamburgers, while Wegant and the rest of the boys had their party inside. I probably should have taken ALL my boys home, or I should have told Mr. Wegant what he could do with his party!

However, I was only 16 at the time, this was before Civil Rights, and the whole situation caught me completely by surprise!

One day in the Spring following that Christmas, one of my customers named Pansy from the East section of Tavares told me that she was going to miss having me for her paper boy. She worked in the lunch room of Tavares School, and someone she worked with had told her that she was taking over my route. I replied that she had heard wrong! I had no plans to give up the route! It was some time later that I finally heard from the Daily Commercial that indeed I was being relieved of my paper route. No reason was ever given to me. Sure enough! My route was taken from me and given to Mrs. Harmon who worked in the lunch room. My customers signed a petition asking that I remain their news carrier, they wrote letters, and about one third of the customers stopped their subscriptions in support of me. My parents and I went to the Commercial office to deliver the petitions and to ask "Why???" No answer was ever given to us, and at the time, we had no clue as to why I had been fired.

It was decades later that we finally connected my firing with the racist behavior of Fred Wegant at the Christmas party. They say, "No good deed goes unpunished!"

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