

Chapter One

The First MLK Day

By Louis S. Pettey

When I started thinking about writing a memoir, I concentrated on my law career, partly because it seemed a logical start, and also because I had a hard time conjuring up memories of anything before that time that would be very interesting.

That all changed after reading a Wall Street Journal article about Republican Presidential candidate Ben Carson in the November 7-8, 2015 edition entitled "*Ben Carson's Past Faces Deeper Questions.*" The article alluded to several events told by Ben Carson in his autobiography that the media was having difficulty fact checking. One of the events Carson recalled was how he, as a junior in high school, had helped shelter some of his white classmates in a biology lab when the mostly black student body of his Detroit high school began rioting after the assassination of Dr. King. That story brought me suddenly to my own memories of that day.

When Martin Luther King was killed April 4, 1968, I was 15 and a sophomore at Gonzaga College High School in NW Washington, DC. I had been home from school by the time the assassination had happened and we had seen coverage about it on TV that evening. However, at that early stage, the press was busy comparing it to the JFK and RFK murders. Trouble was undoubtedly brewing in some cities, but we did not see any news that night about unrest in the nation's capital.

My father had always worked the night shift at the train station in DC, Union Station (a block or so from Gonzaga), from 11 pm to 7 am. Many times he would come home from work only to turn right around to drive me to school, a solid forty five minutes to an hour each way. The next morning after Dr. King was killed, my father did just that, drove me to Gonzaga for what was anticipated to be a normal school day. My father drove home from Union Station and we rode back down to school that early morning of April 5 along the same route where I would later that same morning ride a bus home. It is noteworthy that nothing about either ride was noteworthy.

One must remember that this was in the days long before cell phones and the Internet. The student body landed at Gonzaga that morning ignorant of the possible ramifications of the MLK assassination. Neither the school, nor my father, could be blamed for thinking that a normal school day would not occur on that day, the day following the death of Martin Luther King. There had been some rioting overnight in the area around 14th and U Streets, NW, a bit distant from school, but, again, news coverage and communications were nothing like they are today, and we all simply went to school that morning in, as the expression goes, ignorant bliss.

To its credit, and maybe clued in by looking out the administration windows, Gonzaga made the decision to cancel school early that morning, about an hour after the student body had assembled for classes. I'm not sure we ever got past home room and into first period.

The practical problem was that most of us had no plan as to how to get home. By that time, maybe 10:30 am, my father was certainly asleep, and he was not one to be woken frivolously. He needed his sleep during the daylight hours so he could work his overnight shift at Union Station. My mother drove a car with great reluctance and never had driven to Gonzaga on her own before. In addition, she had my three brothers and my sister, all younger than me, to care for that day. Even if I had wanted to call mom or dad for a ride home, there were very few pay phones at or around school, and each of them had a long line of sportcoated white boys calling their parents for a ride. It was obvious to me that, like most days at Gonzaga, I was going to be on my own to find a way home.

The stop for the bus I usually took to begin my trip home was directly across North Capital Street from the school. In 1968, that area of DC was particularly grimy, in both structural ambiance and in character of the passersby. There was a women's detention center 2 blocks north, and the storefronts along North Capital Street that were not yet closed and boarded up were liquor stores or small groceries selling mostly liquor. If you were lucky, the disheveled person passing you on the sidewalk would be a simple beggar. After a year and a half in that environment, I had developed a number of ways to interact harmlessly and considerately with these fellow inhabitants of the area, and I felt generally comfortable there.

When I looked across North Capital Street to the bus stop that morning, it was mobbed with fellow students. At that time of the morning, rush hour for the bus routes was long over, meaning the busses would run much less frequently, and I knew from experience that when a bus finally came, there would be very little, if any, room for such a large group. That situation left me with a choice of fighting my way into the next bus with the other students or Plan B.

The second option also involved a bus but meant walking north on North Capital Street to the intersection with Rhode Island Avenue, a hardy 10+ blocks of potentially sketchy human interactions, but where another bus in my direction would be available, having turned north from Rhode Island Avenue. Plan B worked out quite well at first, as there were relatively few people on the street to hassle a 15 year old white kid walking alone. However, as I got closer to the huge intersection at Rhode Island Avenue, things began to look ugly. I could see a large crowd of people had gathered on the east side of the street up a block or two from the intersection. Luckily I did not have to wait long, as the bus showed up soon after I arrived. But by that time, and really for the first time that day, I was really and truly scared. There was a growing mob ahead, and, even though I had done nothing to harm Martin Luther King, and, in fact, admired him greatly, my skin color was going to tell them all they needed to know about me. My political opinions were unlikely to be requested in an actual confrontation with that crowd.

The DC Transit bus of the '60s was a diesel smoke belching, at best, utilitarian, form of transportation. On a normal day on the bus ride home, I would first buy that day's edition of the Washington Daily News, the tabloid paper, easy reading in a seat on the bus, and check the sports stories about Frank Howard of the Washington Senators baseball team or Sonny Jurgensen of the Redskins. If nothing good was on the sports page, I would try the IQ quiz or Trivia game. The idea was to find some distraction from the uncomfortable creepiness of the usually filthy bus and its occupants. My biggest fear as a young teenager entering a DC Transit bus was not knowing the amount of the fare for my trip and/or not having the right change for the fare, since the driver would not make or give change. The bus drivers were intimidating to me and, even on a normal day, I always feared that one would just tell me my money was not right and I should get off the bus. After seeing the scene a block up the road that day, I knew I could not let that happen.

Trembling, I deposited the fare in the fare box as I entered the bus and made my way down the aisle to the rear. The first empty seat was the aisle seat on the left just past the back door of the bus. Sitting in the seat was a familiar face and behind that face, in the next row, were two other familiar faces.

The intersection of North Capital Street and Rhode Island Avenue in DC is geographically close to McKinley Tech, the local neighborhood public high school. It was also, coincidentally, the high school from which my father had attended and graduated 24 years earlier. In those 24 years, the skin complexion of Washington, D.C. and McKinley Tech had darkened. Those three familiar faces were the black faces of students at Tech who were more or less my age. I had never spoken to any of the three of them, but had seen them each many times before on the bus home. Every other time they were getting on a bus 10 blocks after I had. I may have even sat with one of them before but did not remember.

On that morning of April 5, 1968, as I made my way down the aisle, the boy with the empty seat next to him eyed me and the empty seat in a way that invited me to sit. I did. As the lumbering bus edged forward, one of the boys behind me leaned forward and whispered "don't worry, we will take care of you" or words to that effect. I nodded acknowledgement. Just then, I peered out the window of the bus as we made our way past the mob that had been a block away before. I saw a sea of angry black faces, many carrying signs. The only sign I remember said "IT WAS A WHITE BULLET THAT KILLED DR. KING" and I never forgot it. I can see it in my mind's eye even now, 47 years later. These people were possibly some of the same persons who rioted later that same day along the nearby H Street, NE corridor, burning down that commercial strip and effectively ruining their own neighborhood for decades to come.

At some point the bus passed the mob and the boys left the bus. I do not remember if we spoke or even interacted again. I was feeling a lot safer, in the friendlier neighborhood of Brookland, home of Trinity College and Catholic University.

Unfortunately, the bus only went as far as Sargeant Road and Gallatin Street, still in DC and still very far from home in Adelphi, Maryland. As was my usual practice at that point I began hitchhiking the rest of the way home. Again, those were different times. I knew many Gonzaga boys who hitchhiked at least part of the way to and from school. It was usually not a very scary thing to do and you met some interesting people.

On that day, I had not posed my entreating thumb more than five minutes before a car pulled up to me. It was a small sports car driven by an obviously fairly well-to-do young black man. I figured him for college age or maybe a little older. He looked at me and hollered "what in the world are you doing here - do you have any idea of what is going on?" I said I did know a little, admitted I was scared and wanted to get home. He asked where I lived and when I told him he said he'd take me as far as Ager Road, but no further. I gratefully hopped in, book bag in tow.

As promised, this nice man drove me to the safety of the suburbs and then left me to find the rest of my way home. At that point I was still miles away, but in familiar and comfortable territory, and, even with all of the events of that crazy morning, it was only a little after noon and I was suddenly in no real hurry to get home. I stuffed my thumb in my pocket and walked up Riggs Road the several miles to my house, finally breathing easily, wondering what was going on back in DC and when I would go back to school.

I have no idea who any of these four people were who unselfishly guarded and protected some privileged looking white kid from the suburbs. Certainly none of them was Ben Carson, but any of them could have been. If in fact Ben Carson sheltered some fellow students from a violent mob on that day in 1968, I admire him for that effort as I admired those who helped me. Those four young men were some of the finest people I have ever (if only barely) met.

In retrospect, the MLK day experience, along with the Jesuit mandate of service to others, instilled a sense of belonging in the inner city community such that eight years later I was a law student clerking for the Neighborhood Legal Services Program in northeast DC, spending some days all alone manning the storefront office on H Street, where most of the buildings burned out on April 5, 1968 were still a charred out shell.