



BARBERSHOP TALK

A recipe called the Human Race



by Robert L. Woodard
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Living in South Philadelphia all of my life made it easy for me to eat any type of food I desired. As a child, I was obese. When I reached adulthood, I weighed more than 300 pounds.

I remember getting up in the morning with thoughts of food on my mind. I even worked many odd jobs to feed my appetite. I was a newspaper boy, I bagged groceries in supermarkets and I worked as a stock boy at Sears and Roebuck. Even before that, my friend John Robbins (aka "Frankie") and I worked at a wholesale store called N. Tilli & Sons at 17th and Federal. They sold snack foods to all the neighborhood stores. We learned how to stamp cigarettes with a very important Pennsylvania State stamping machine that enabled Mr. Tilli and his sons to sell cigarettes in Philadelphia. That memory reminds me of my father, James Woodard, and his love for El Producto's Blunt Cigars and Old Hickory Smoking Tobacco for his vintage wooden pipes.

Back then, South Philadelphia was known as the sandwich capital of the world. I remember saving a part of my weekly earnings just to go on a tour to see who had the best sandwich in South Philly. Some of those places were the *Thomas Bakery* and *Nook's* at 17th and Montrose; *Wong's Chinese Soul Food Restaurant* at 18th and Christian; *Melino's* at 15th and Ellsworth; *Eddie's* at 22nd and Bainbridge; *Earl's* at 19th and Catherine; *Pat's Steaks* at 9th and Wharton; *Geno's* on 9th Street and *Miss Elizabeth Walker's Ice Cream Parlour* at 19th and Carpenter, which also sold popcorn, snacks and peanuts.

After the tour, some of my friends and I - John Taylor (aka "Jackie") and Ollie Johnson (who later became a Philadelphia 76er) - discussed which ones were our favorites. Food became an obsession for me. I thought about it constantly. Even while my father drove us around to do errands for his dry cleaning business. Before heading home, we would pick up groceries for my mother, Gloria Woodard. As always, she stayed at home preparing breakfast, lunch and dinner. With 10 children, she had no time to go shopping. She even shared food with customers at the dry cleaners. My mother was my best friend; my father was my disciplinarian. Each made me who I am today, which is why I honored my mother and father.

My father made it clear to me that there were people in our poor neighborhood that did not have the privilege of eating three meals a day. It was then that I learned that many of my friends were eating snacks as food and sandwiches instead of whole meals. At the time, healthy eating did not matter to me. I

thought that anything that tasted good was good for me. The weight I continued to gain made me one of the "fat boys" in the neighborhood. Wherever I went, I felt fat. I walked fat, I talked fat, I sat down fat, I ran fat and I even looked fat. I was fat.

After graduating from South Philadelphia High School, I was drafted by a lottery for the Vietnam War.

It was like culture shock. One minute I'm graduating high school and the next minute I'm being sent to war. When doctors checked my blood pressure, they were shocked. They told me anyone with pressure so high would be dead. They asked that I return to the recruitment office at 401 N. Broad Street three times a day for the entire week so they could monitor my pressure. By the end of the week, with my pressure still dangerously high, they decided I was not a candidate for the war. They gave me a 4F, which disqualified me from the military. Being "fat" saved my life.

I remember watching the news one morning and hearing about young graduates from nearby Edison High School who were killed in Vietnam. I thought about all of these young high school kids losing their lives or returning from war mangled and emotionally scarred. These young men were drafted around the same time as me. I realized that even though I did not qualify for the War, I could still die from high blood pressure, heart attack or a stroke. I had to take better care of myself. When the Vietnam War ended, the war to live a healthy life began. Whole foods, fruits and vegetables became my friends. I even created my own super hero character - *Melanin Man* - to help spread the word about healthy foods to others, especially children. Melanin Man fights diseases with his "fruit and vegetable" friends. Melanin Man even has his own slogan. "What you take into your body affects how you feel and what you feel affects how you think and what you think affects whatever you do mentally, physically and emotionally." I learned to love the foods that loved me back. We as a Human Race must learn how to love our neighbors. We can exchange dialogue and share our diverse experiences to better understand our distinct cultures and traditions. We can share healthy recipes and understand how food can become the medicine to help us heal our bodies and lead healthier lives. Here's a little food for thought. There is only "One Race" called "Human" with many cultures and there is only "One Color" called "Melanin" with many shades. This all makes up a wonderful recipe called the "Human Race," created by God. Take the "RACE Test" today for a better way at www.Barbershop-TalkHFD.org. **PRH**

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