

HISTORY OF AN EVOLVING CHRISTIAN/ HUMANIST RACIST, PART I

by Sylvia Metzler

I don't think I started out as a racist in 1937 but I did have plenty of white privilege. No Black families were permitted to live in Lancaster's East End where my family enjoyed a comfortable single home in a safe and pretty neighborhood. I attended a well-funded all-white elementary school there and in Upper Darby where we moved eight years later. Both my parents worked so Mom hired a cleaning woman to help out. She was the only African American person I knew wherever I ventured – school, church or neighborhood. To my mother's credit, my brother and I were not allowed to call Mrs. Brown by her first name. I was less respectful to her when I would argue with her about the best way to clean. I know now that her methods were superior.

Less respectful still was my father's barking at my choice of music on the radio: "Turn off that damn n----- music!"

In high school I never met the two Black students in my graduating class of 500. I did eventually meet some of my mother's Black fellow students and professors when she attended Cheyney College, now a University, to earn her Masters degree in special ed. After encountering them and several Black nurses and doctors when I entered nursing school, I had an epiphany. All my young life I had believed "colored people" were intellectually inferior to white people. I began to wonder what else I had gotten wrong.

After graduating as an RN in 1958, my husband, Dick, and I moved to Norristown. We were soon able to put a \$1000 down payment on a new \$12,000 row house. We had met a young Black couple with two boys the same age as ours who visited us and liked our home. They tried to buy one but were turned down. So while Dick and I were able to build up equity and then move to a single home with a big yard, our Black friends were still living in a run-down part of town with schools that were poorly funded and maintained.

Much to my husband's dismay, I got involved in the Norristown School District fight over integration and busing. As a result, my children and I were labeled "N lovers". Also as a result of my activism, a blind acquaintance asked me if I were Black? My response? "Oh my God - No".

Around this time, my husband's union, IBEW local #380. was told it had to integrate. Dick said the next union meeting was the best attended in their history with everyone pledged to vote "No". But then their business agent informed them that if they did not admit at least one Black electrician, the government would step in with half a dozen! So Herb, an experienced electrician, was reluctantly admitted and given the worst jobs and robbed of his tools at every opportunity. To my amazement, my husband who had been raised in a southern racist family befriended Herb.

Our family were faithful members of a local Presbyterian church where I was sure that my fellow Christians would, unlike the unions, be committed to fighting racism. I taught Sunday School and helped arrange an exchange program with the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church in the “east end” of town. As long as our joint meetings took place Sunday morning in the churches, our board and general membership seemed supportive. But when we proposed a Saturday afternoon outing and picnic, we hit the proverbial wall. “DATING – RACE MIXING – OMG – MARRIAGE!!!” That ended the exchange with our AME sisters and brothers.

I was learning and growing but was also scared about rejection from family, friends and neighbors. I was reluctant to challenge racist remarks and jokes. I continued to do business with banks and Realtors who discriminated against people of color. At about age 35, I had come a long way but suspected I still had a long way to go.

Stay tuned for *History of an Evolving Christian/Humanist Racist*, Part II.