



## USEP-OHIO PARENT TIP: Reminders from Trayvon One Mom's Experiences

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My thoughts have been filled with the Trayvon Martin story. The whole story, and the outcomes of the trial remind me of how the world has changed, and yet remains so much the same. I have been reminded of how much I/we have learned, and yet how ignorance abounds. No matter what I think I learn and understand, I still do not really know how it feels to be another. I am continually reminded of how ignorant I am in understanding how life feels in others' shoes.

### **My experiences shaped my thoughts.**

I remember feeling sad and sorry that my high school classmate, Florrie, was seldom included in the group when our class had a party or a dance. I regretted that she never had a date from our school, and wondered if she dated. I even made myself feel better about her social isolation by convincing myself that perhaps her parents did not want her to date or interact socially with us; but perhaps she had a rich dating life in the black community with friends from her own neighborhood. Unfortunately my bubble was burst when she went out of her way to visit the midwestern class reunion - all the way from California! She said, "Cindy, you and Judy were the only ones who regularly talked to me. Many of the others NEVER spoke to me." I had no idea. I am embarrassed to say, I was totally ignorant; probably because I was more comfortable remaining ignorant!

**In later years, as I settled into motherhood**, we were thrilled to have our children attending Shaker Heights Schools. Shaker Heights was a respected, highly rated school district, and the first in the country to begin voluntary busing. The community was a great mix of families of a variety of cultures and races. Man we were learning a lot! I worked in the Cleveland Public Schools and all around the metro area. But Shaker was way ahead! We were so proud to come from an area where all races were treated with respect. One day, early in the school year, students were asked to purchase some special materials available at a Warrensville Heights department Store near home. My girls were cute, white and blonde. They successfully purchased the needed supplies among a throng of students awaiting service. The daughters of my friend and teaching colleague, Minnie, were in the same crowd attempting to purchase their supplies from the same counter, but never received a clerk's notice - so came home without the needed supplies. I asked Minnie, "What happened? Did they run out? Minnie answered, "Cindy, what do you think?" Suddenly I knew that my polite, cute caucasian daughters were treated differently than Minnie's polite, cute African American daughters - right in our own perfect suburban neighborhood!

We just don't know. We thought, we hoped that the world would truly be a different place in the years ahead. Later, I sat through some of the Cleveland testimony that showed me that without a doubt, in my opinion, those schools were systematically segregated throughout history - NO doubt in my mind. I was shocked again. How could the public and private leadership of such a fine city will it to happen?!

**I experienced a shock when Brian and Greg, our dear neighbor kids (both honor students) took several Plain Dealer routes as a sure way to success and spending money.** They enthusiastically delivered, hated to collect for their routes but were prized in the neighborhood for always delivering on time, early each morning. One day, our dear friend and neighbor and his wife, both in their year of residency at Metro Hospital, called the police after spotting two black boys in the driveway. Not realizing it was the kids they loved, they later admitted they would

not have called the cops if there were two white kids in the driveway at 5 am.

**Evelyn and Arthur Barnett continued to lead the after-school program at a large inner-city church in Columbus well into their 90's!** I admired them so very much. One day I asked them to tell me what it was like for them, living in Columbus during the years when I was growing up in Ft Wayne, Indiana. They told they had to drink out of a different fountain, use a different restroom, and sit in the balcony in Columbus theaters! I never realized that northern cities had treated races so differently.

**I did know that rude and racist comments about nonwhite residents of Cleveland could be overheard over dinner or passed off as "jokes" in supposedly nice family settings.** I remember good churchgoing folks referring to people as "they" and am sure that occasionally the "n" word was quietly uttered.

**Recently my husband and I watched the new film 42.** It is the movie version of Jackie Robinson's entrance into baseball and the huge ripple it made on sports, and all of America. Thanks to Branch Rickey (played by Harrison Ford), who, if the script is accurate, stoically championed Jackie and was there to catch all the fallout including challenges from other cities, other teams, and even the Dodger players who worked for him. Jackie and Rachel Robinson, were placed in the middle of a torrent of criticism and hate, but grew into the job and "took it" as Jackie slowly won the hearts and sympathies of many players and fans by absorbing an amazing amount of hate and playing great ball!

**How could we still be experiencing the same behaviors? How could Americans still be willing to hide behind convention and yet think and refer to white kids so differently. When President Obama recently commented, "It could have been my son. It could have been me!"** He reminded me of the times I know about, and many I don't know about, that my own nephew has been physically threatened and emotionally shunned. I suspect that it has been lots of times, as the African American, adopted kid in our family - even among mixed groups of kids in his Washington, DC area home. One notable time was when he was picked out and threatened by several white teenagers in a Quick Serve market on Bonita Beach Road near my parents' place in Florida - just going with his mom and dad and brother to visit the grandparents on spring break. Yup that was years ago, but it was a sickening experience for all of us....probably made worse by the fact that the story was not repeated, because to make a big thing of it might make people uncomfortable. No teen wants others to single them out or feel sympathy toward them.

But As I watched 42 and saw Jackie Robinson playing his first game on an all-white team as he tried out for Branch Rickey, hoping to become a minor league player and ultimately a Dodger- I realized it happened to be in Sanford Florida. The irony was not lost on me!

Sanford was where my husband's company had a plant and a lovely house they used for business meetings and out of town guests. Sanford was where we have good friends living. Sanford was where Jackie Robinson played that early game. And Sanford was where six decades later, Trayvon Martin was followed - perhaps stalked, and ultimately killed by a man who had been told NOT to follow him. And now Sanford has become the place where that man has been found not guilty - because six people could not comfortably find him guilty based on the evidence presented. I don't know much about Sanford, or even the details of the trial and its outcomes. But I do know this. It is not just about Trayvon or Sanford. It is about each of us.

It could have been my nephew. And it is 2013!

I also know that just as I was ignorant by assuming that everyone was as informed and progressive as I thought Shaker Heights was 30 years ago; that all cute little girls were treated equally if they were well-behaved in the community shops; even as I assumed that Florrie had dates and friends and was treated with love and understanding by most; even as I assumed that my nephew was just mistreated because it was a southern state and surely these roughians were

more ignorant than most; I understand that racism still abounds. And each of us moment to moment can be racists or at least have racist thoughts and attitudes.

**But we can make a difference. Compassion is not enough.**

We can keep growing, and striving to understand our prejudices and our differences. The world HAS changed since my days in school, and even since the experiences in Shaker Heights. Recently, my well-educated friend, who has worked with the highest Washington officials including heads of the U.S. House and Senate, told me that I was using the wrong word when I referred to my friend as black. He said, "You are really out of step. Don't you know it is 'African American'?" I tried to take it easy on him when I answered that in my experience not all people of a race view things in the same way. "Some of my friends actually prefer 'black' over African American." It told me once again how far behind we are when we think we know the answers! I am one mother, one educator, who has learned over and over again that no matter how many classes we offer to teach relevance and sensitivity and diversity .....we still make big mistakes and leave out critical empathy. Has my friend not had all of the seminars and classes I have experienced as an educator? How could he not know? Ha! Then I remember myself and my supposed well-informed, "empathetic" approach. None of us can know it all.

**The Trayvon Martin tragedy should remind us not to hate one race or the other, or focus on blaming the system! It should remind us of how crucial it is to know that we can never truly experience being in another's shoes. It is critical that we be forever vigilant to assumptions that we all have about "others" of every color and creed and gender and experience. Justice is certainly somewhere buried in each recognition and acceptance of our own recurring ignorance!**

**by Cindy McKay (Just based on my personal thoughts, feelings and observations)**

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