



Combatting Subtle Racism

Avoiding ignorance and negative attitudes a great start in the improvement of race relations

By Seymour Hardy Floyd
Contributor

"Let me ask you a question about the race issue since you brought it up. You talk about a level playing field, but given the history of blacks in America- slavery and then the Jim Crow era of discrimination- do you really believe the field is level for blacks today?"

"Of course, precisely the opposite is true. White males are at the disadvantage now, and I don't think anyone challenges that—it's created worse than necessary race relations, because you've ended up making a lot of white males angry at blacks when they've had no reason to be angry at blacks."

It was very disappointing that Harvey Gantt lost his bid for the U.S. Senate last November. That Jesse Helms was the victor—well, one can only hope that this is Helms' last term; with him representing North Carolina, race relations in this state will only be able to progress so much, and more likely, race relations will continue to worsen as they have been for some time now.

In response to a letter to the

editor printed in the Greensboro News & Record, in which a Siler City citizen called "race-mixing" a sin, a Reidsville reader wrote, "I hope they bury your old ideas the same time they bury you."

That is a proper response to Jesse Helms' "old ideas." I would like to think that when Jesse Helms dies- or at least when he is no longer in office- this state will not have elected representatives of the people who share Helms' attitudes about race. Such hopeful thinking would be naive, however. By reading letters to the editor in *The Daily Tar Heel* alone, you can learn that many who are our age- representing the FUTURE- have attitudes at least as backwards as Jesse Helms'.

And in Guilford County, while so many in this state worried about Jesse Helms, a "no name" slipped through and found himself elected onto the Guilford County Board of Commissioners. And among the Commissioners, he was selected as their new chairman. His name is Steve Arnold and his name can be attributed to the second quote I presented at the beginning, a response to one of several questions from an interview printed in the Jan. 13 News & Record.

To further develop an image of Arnold for you, I can simply say that that quote was a very mild view of his. It would not be a waste of your time to pull a copy of that newspaper and read the interview that begins on the front page of Section E, Commentary of that edition. Hopefully, nothing will be too shocking. Arnold is not alone in his views. While he has many critics, he has also enjoyed very strong support by many who are impressed that he seems so committed to combatting the abuses of government—particularly concerning spending. It is easier to accept that people like Arnold and Helms exist than it is to accept that enough people either share or condone their views to assure that they are in positions of power.

It is a sad and painful reality, but any efforts you might have made to combat racism on this campus will probably have to be increased to assure any kind of change in environments that might be worse than the situation on this campus. You may be ahead of those who attended traditionally African-American institutions of higher learning, if only because you will be prepared to face and

challenge the attitudes that exist among the white majority. (This probably depends most on the individual.) At the over 90 percent African-American high school I attended, racial incidents against African-Americans did not occur to my knowledge. At worst, white students kept to themselves.

That is not to say that I was not aware of racism. My initial experiences with James B. Dudley High School in Greensboro made me aware of racism. From my majority white neighborhood, in which all students were assigned to the same high school- Dudley- very, very few whites actually attended. I do not know actual percentages, but when I graduated, no other white students from my neighborhood graduated with me. So what did these students do? Many transferred to different school systems, their parents paying for their education. Other parents decided that such an awful fate merited a move to any other neighborhood where their children would be assigned to a predominantly white school. Several lied about their residency, indicating that they lived somewhere other than where they really

lived to allow them to attend a different school. And in the worst case scenario I heard about, some parents paid for their children to see a psychiatrist who would provide documentation that the students could not function in such an intimidating, lesser environment. (Probably, if these students attended UNC, they would be the first to accuse you of being oversensitive to racism.)

Commentary

Thus was I enlightened about the world of "subtle" racism. And during my high school years, I was equally aware of racism. I read about Tawana Brawley; Bensonhurst; Howard Beach; the white Boston resident who killed his pregnant wife, informing police of the "black male" responsible; Jimmy "the Greek" and David Duke to mention a few of the incidents and people that come to mind—not to mention the local incidents, such as discriminatory practices revealed within the Greensboro Coliseum and a protest staged by African-American students at Page High School where the school newspaper printed disturbing, yet revealing quotes that exposed negative ra-

cial attitudes, in addition to a political cartoon depicting stereotypes that offended many students. And yet at Dudley, I do not remember any exposed incidents of racism by white students toward African-American students. And my personal experience found only very isolated incidents of racism toward me—always subtle although I did hear about some other white students having problems. To an extent, the environment probably served as a shelter for African-Americans. When I informed some students that whites had transferred by the means described above, to avoid attending Dudley, some actually seemed surprised.

My experiences here at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have been revealing. I have undergone transformations in much of my thinking about race relations. Before I became aware of the number of white students on this campus who held negative views toward African-American students and about race relations (to put it mildly), I thought that African-American student leaders

responded to some racial incidents early in the school year a little too strongly. I did not carry those opinions to the extent of not understanding why certain incidents (like Harvey Gantt's campaign poster being defaced with racial slurs) should be labeled "racist." But when students attacked the "innocent" administration, I thought they were a little too extreme in their stands.

The administration does always issue positive quotes about incidents, saying that if found those responsible will be punished fully and that such incidents are "intolerable" and "to be condemned." I cannot disagree with such thinking. But during the very brief lulls between racial incidents on this campus, the University is very capable of ignoring very relevant issues related to race relations. The University has its pet projects, and consistent efforts against racism and in favor of positive race relations and an expanded, more inclusive curriculum are not evident.

Funny enough, such an ap-
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