

The Nashville Story

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Citizens in one city attempt to improve human relations as a necessary step towards school desegregation.

This is an account of some undramatic Nashville Citizens trying to help their Southern community toward integration of public schools. The story takes place in no man's land. Between compliance and resistance lies Tennessee, a "wait and see" state.

The Supreme Court decision was announced in 1954 and everyone seemed to wait. Men and women of good will in Nashville waited too. Surely somebody would do something about it. It takes quite a while before a person of good will realizes that what he is waiting for is himself.

In the spring of 1955, the local presidents of the United Church Women and the Council of Jewish Women agreed that something should be done to educate the community on the Court's decision. So they invited 13 additional community organizations to co-sponsor a workshop. Seven organizations accepted: American Association of University Women, B'nai B'rith, Citizens Committee for the Public Schools, Council of Colored Parents and Teachers, League of Women Voters of Nashville, Nashville Association of Churches, Young Women's Christian Association.

Presidents are loaded down with responsibilities, so a trio of women handled many details. After the workshop, someone said, "Were you three chosen to represent a balance of religions and races?" The trio happened to be Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish; two white and one Negro woman. The matter of "balance" had occurred to no one, least of all to the three. A job needed to be done.

The sponsors had anticipated 150 in attendance at the evening meeting in May 1955. Instead, 500 came to hear Whitworth Stokes III, a local attorney; Charles S. Johnson, the president of Fisk University; and George Mitchell, the director of the Southern Regional Council. The three men spoke on "The Supreme Court Decision and its Meaning for Our Community." The next day, 180 people came back for the experience of communication through small groups across racial lines. The writer, a professor at the local teachers college, served as moderator of both meetings. The meetings were held in the Jewish Community Center; clergymen of the various faiths spoke the invocation, About two-thirds of the participants were white; seating was unsegregated.

But a workshop, however effective, is soon over. Some religiously motivated people stepped into the gap. Typical were a teacher at a college for Christian workers and a head of a commission for a Protestant denomination. Luncheons for discussion and fellowship were held at intervals and attended by leaders of both races. Out of the sharing grew two goals, another community workshop, and a permanent community organization on human relations.

The sponsors of the February 1956 workshop had grown from 9 to 26 organizations, including labor, nursing, and church groups. Now the topic was "Integration--How and When?" Now the workshop was held in a Protestant church. Now school experience from outside the community was called on; schoolmen from Baltimore and St. Louis, Harry Bard and Frank Sskwor, talked to 600 people and held an off-the-record conference with local superintendents and school board members. Back the next night came 360 to work out recommendations to sponsoring organizations for follow-up action. As moderator, the writer can testify that the meetings were orderly and thoughtful.

The next objective was to establish a community organization to work toward better group relationships. More than a dedicated few would be needed if Nashville was to have an effective permanent group on human relations. Still more Nashvillians who were white, Protestant, and several generations in Nashville must accept a greater lead in human relations work if the new organization was to really make a difference.

The faithful few approached community leaders, requesting them to join the sponsoring group; 84 community leaders agreed to sponsor an organizational meeting. In April 1956, with more than 120 people in attendance, the Nashville Community Relations Conference was formally born.

Responsibility was lodged in the hands of established Nashville community leaders. The five officers were the president of a local foundry and machine company, an attorney who was the son and grandson of Tennessee lawyers, a head of a university department of medicine, a state PTA officer, the wife of a Negro college president, and an active community worker of the Jewish faith. A 50-person Board of Directors and a 13-person Executive Committee, biracial, multi-religioned, and active in business, labor and the professions, were created. Later, 11 Committees were set up to tap the energies of still more members: membership; finances; meetings; fact-finding; parent education; fellowship luncheons; community education; human relations education in the schools; health; religious activities; employment.

In August 1956 a letter from the Executive Committee to the Nashville School Board, which was being sued by Negro parents, urged school board members to formulate a plan to desegregate in the fall of 1956. "Only in one respect do we make any suggestion--we would much prefer that you, as the local authority, develop and install the plan rather than have the United States Courts order some plan of compliance." The vice-president of the Conference appeared before the board in support of the letter.

The school board took no action toward desegregation till the fall term began. But October 30, 1956, the headlines react, "City Schools Act to Integrate Next Fall."

One of the active committees of the Nashville Community Relations Conference was the committee on human relations education in the schools, made up of respected educators from Nashville colleges and universities. The Conference committee offered help to the superintendent of schools through a letter in December 1956. While the offer was never

officially accepted, members of the committee cooperated informally with school administrators.

The Conference committee on parent education made efforts to persuade the local PTAs to hold meetings in preparation for the coming desegregation. Committee efforts were unsuccessful because of the unreadiness of the white PTA Council to foster meetings of any type concerning desegregation.

The Conference committee on community education was influential particularly through the activities of its chairman who quietly consulted with the transportation authorities on bus desegregation and with the police department on meeting possible violence. The committee on fact-finding reported on the extent of desegregation in Nashville organizations and institutions. The Fellowship Luncheons included a tribute to the late president of Fisk University and a panel through which spokesmen for Nashville organizations described how desegregation of their memberships had been achieved.

LEGISLATION

By New Year's Day, 1957, concern of those who were working for better human relations in Nashville shifted to the coming session of the Tennessee legislature. Would the general assembly pass segregationist legislation?

After lengthy sessions, the Executive Committee decided to develop a statement on 1957 school legislation which advanced many reasons for its conclusion, "we firmly believe that no legislation on this subject should be passed at this session of the Tennessee General Assembly." Copies of the mimeographed statement of several pages were distributed to each legislator, brought to the Governor, sent to the various media of communication.

Meanwhile, Governor Clement proposed two bills, described as "moderate segregation" legislation. One bill authorized boards of education to provide separate schools for white and Negro children whose parents elected to send them to such schools. The second bill gave boards of education the power to assign pupils to schools for a variety of reasons.

Two conferences were held with the Governor in which he explained his position to representatives of the conference who remained unpersuaded of the desirability of any legislation. The Conference, however, did not testify as an organization against the "moderate segregation" legislation proposed by Governor Clement. Some Executive Committee members, impressed by the vehemence of the extremists, argued that the Governor's bills were the best that could be expected under the circumstances and predicted that they would be found unconstitutional anyway.

At the public hearing of the Senate and House Education and judiciary committees of the Tennessee General Assembly on January 15, 1957, a clergyman of the Southern Baptist faith and the writer of this article were the only two white people in Tennessee heard in

testimony against the bills. Both men testified as individuals, not as representatives of their employers or organizations. The bills passed overwhelmingly in mid-January 1957.

LAW AND ORDER

The Federal District Court, in late January 1957, accepted the Nashville School Board's proposal that desegregation of only the first grade in the Nashville public school take place in September 1957. For a period of time following this decision, the board of education and the school administration of Nashville continued the long established policy of "wait and see" which was highly characteristic of both the city, the state, and much of the upper South. Then, in March 1957, the superintendent of schools presented to the board of education a statement calling for men of good will to support the board in carrying out the court order; the board adopted it unanimously.

In order to help the board carry out its new policy and as an indication of support from people of good will, the Nashville Community Relations Conference in May 1957 sponsored a public talk by Omer Carmichael, superintendent of schools of Louisville, Kentucky. W. A. Bass, the superintendent of schools of Nashville, an able schoolman nearing retirement, was cooperative. He invited Dr. Carmichael to speak at a morning meeting of administrators and teachers and urged the Conference to write principals advising them to send teachers to hear Dr. Carmichael at the evening meeting. At least 400 Nashville teachers heard the Louisville superintendent, and an audience of 400 attended the evening session at Hume-Fogg High School.

The superintendent of Nashville then initiated a series of meetings in the schools to explain the board's policy. The program met marked resistance from one patron who monopolized the first meeting at a school and who later organized a "Parents Preference Committee." The new segregationist committee began getting thousands of signatures to a petition "preferring" desegregated schools. Shortly afterwards the superintendent fell ill; plans lapsed for active preparation for desegregation of the first grade through community meetings sponsored by the school system.

The stark, brutal question became whether or not law and order would be maintained. During the summer of 1957, the Executive Committee of the Nashville Community Relations Conference encouraged four outstanding local business and civic leaders to sponsor a statement supporting law and order. The statement did not endorse integration; it simply called for law enforcement. Eventually, the statement was signed by 600 people, including some Nashville community leaders whose names were known and respected. Particularly prominent among the endorsers were clergymen, educators, doctors, leaders of the Methodist Board of Education, and divinity school professors.

But businessmen proved extremely hesitant to add their signatures to the law and order statement. The Mayor indicated support but thought it inappropriate to initiate the statement by his signature. Various prominent community figures, including some eminent educators, found reasons for not signing.

Copies of the statement and lists of signatures were turned over to the superintendent of schools after a meeting in July 1957, in which the incoming and outgoing superintendents addressed and thanked the Conference. .

In the last few weeks prior to desegregation of the first grade, the Conference also attempted to develop community meetings for discussion of the coming desegregation. The Conference members found that leaders of various organizations were willing to cooperate, including the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the Nashville Association of Social Workers, the Negro PTA, the Nashville Ministerial Association, the Nashville Association of Churches, etc. The plans received a fatal setback when the white PTA Council decided that meetings were inadvisable.

Meanwhile, the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government, which had among its key leaders a professor of English at Vanderbilt University, continued to oppose the coming desegregation. The Parents Preference Committee continued to gather signatures.

The extremist segregationists also increased their activities. Meetings of the Ku Klux Klan were held. Yet only 50 robed Klansmen attended one highly publicized meeting which the writer observed.

Shortly after the Clinton trial, John Kasper made Nashville his headquarters. He began with small audiences. With time and publicity, his audiences steadily increased. One of his final harangues was delivered with rope in hand before the state capitol building of Tennessee.

On August 8, 1957, the extremists, including Kasper, appeared before the school board in opposition to the coming desegregation of the first grade. At the same meeting, the president of the Nashville Community Relations Conference indicated support of the board, asked the board how the Conference might best help, and released the law and order statement signed by 600 people.

The appearance before the board by the representative of the Nashville Community Relations Conference was one of very few moderate organizational counters to the increasing violent talk of the extremists. Though the bi-racial Conference represented the position of only a segment of Nashville opinion, through the Conference statements and activities the voice of conscience and humane relations among men was heard in the community. It has been said that the existence of the Conference explains partially, though certainly not wholly, why the Nashville story, 1957 version, did not become the Little Rock story, 1957 version.

The great body of Nashville citizens avoided any commitment as they followed the social strategy of "Say nothing, wait and see." But time was running out. There was a touch of September in the air. The opening of school was just around the corner.

The rest of the story the reader knows. For several days in September 1957, black headlines shrieked of Nashville in the national and world press. Racists demonstrated and threatened as 19 wide-eyed Negro six-year-olds came to formerly all-white schools. Then at 12:30 A.M. on the morning of September 10, 1957, a bomb blew up the new Hattie Cotton School. The blast blew many solid citizens of Nashville out of their comfortable beds. The city temporarily awakened from slumber.

In the morning the police cracked down on would-be demonstrators. The demonstrations dissolved. The six-year-olds went back to school and Kasper went away. People explained to each other that what had happened was all the fault of that outsider from New Jersey.

In March 1958, the Jewish Community Center was dynamited by racists. The Nashville Community Relations Conference said, "we believe that the citizens of this community are all partly responsible ... to the extent that we failed to support adequately with our time, our resources and our ideas the forces in our community working for harmony, justice, equality and dignity for all our citizens. This is the time ... to join hands in a total community effort for better human relations."

As to the future, including Fall 1958, the gods give no guarantees.

Educational Leadership, 1958