

MY INVOLVEMENT IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

BY PATRICK FRANK

Part I:

My Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement Began in Gainesville, FL



One White Boy

*One white boy all alone, in 1962
Caught between the wrong and
right, whatever will he do*

*Father died the other day, a man
he barely knew
Mother drank her life away, and
drank his spirit, too*

*KKK was on the rise, the dragon
marching through
One white boy stood up to them
They called him "Nigger-Jew"*

*Tallahassee was the place, the
memory seems new
One black boy played ball with
him, confided in him, too*

*One white boy, all alone, in 1962
One white boy without a girl,
The sky is changing hue*

My introduction to the civil rights movement came in fits and starts. There are certain images and events that stick out in my mind. The first occurred during high school, when I went with a black kid to the Delray Beach recreation center to play basketball. We were turned away for the obvious reason: the facility was segregated.

The strange thing is that he and I did not know each other `till that very day. We met on the street and somehow struck up a conversation, and decided to go together to the Rec center...to no avail...but when I moved to Gainesville in 1962 to attend the University of Florida: that's when my involvement intensified. I was struggling to adjust to life on campus and in the community. At one point, I ended up virtually homeless after being kicked out of a rooming house for really no good reason.

Anyway, again somehow I was introduced to a black lady who let me stay in her house near Alachua General Hospital. It was a ramshackle dwelling but she allowed me to sleep on the couch and fed me for a while until I got back on my feet. I remember seeing rats crawling around the kitchen at night, but no matter: this lady must have had a big heart to take in this struggling white kid whom she barely knew.

Through her I met Carol Thomas, the wife of a University physics professor who emerged as a major figure in the civil rights movement in Gainesville. She and her husband rented out a room to me. And, from that point involvement in the movement became a prominent part of my experience, though I was never a "leader."

I began to attend meetings of the NAACP at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Gainesville, on Fifth Avenue, in the 'Black Section' of town. I remember that Charles Chestnut Jr. was the President of the group.

Eventually, I joined the NAACP Youth Council. The group was planning demonstrations to integrate restaurants and other facilities in Gainesville. I remember vividly our picketing the *Waffle Shop* on University Avenue. We sat in at their lunch counter--to no avail. This must have been in 1962 or 1963.

Small details stand out. I remember that I was wearing boots at the time (an affectation of youth, I suppose) and someone played on the juke box "*These Boots Are Made for Walkin*" in response. Did the rednecks feel we were walking over them or that they intended to walk over us? Maybe, a little of both. We went on to picket the Florida Theatre downtown, which of course was also segregated. I don't recall if we succeeded or failed in our efforts at that point. We proceeded to picket a laundry/dry cleaning facility that would not hire blacks or, I suppose, serve black customers. That's when I was assaulted on the picket line by a man named Philman, whom I remember operated a street sweeper for the city. For some reason, he singled me out as the only white participant in the demonstration. The image that sticks out in my mind is of my fellow picketers surrounding me after I was knocked to the ground--to protect me with their bodies and signs. That was an amazing moment for me, an example of blacks helping whites in a moment of crisis that I will never forget.

One thing that observers may not realize is that the civil rights movement was not just about blacks helping blacks or whites helping blacks. It was also about blacks helping whites in a number of respects. For one thing, my conscience was stimulated through my involvement in the movement. For another, I came to realize how compassion and caring are sometimes manifested in a way that transcends social and cultural barriers.

Part II:

More of a Foot Soldier than a Leader

The civil rights movement in Northern Florida heated up in the early sixties, touching both blacks and whites in many locales: Tallahassee, Gainesville, St. Augustine, etc. I continued my involvement in the Gainesville movement. As I said, I was more of a foot soldier than a leader.

Through the movement, I made a good friend: a black gentleman named George Fair, a preacher with a tiny church in the country outside Gainesville. George and I usually met up in a coffee shop near the campus of UF called *Larry's*. *Larry's* was, obviously, integrated. So was the *Trail ways Bus Station Cafe*, where we also met. We talked about the movement and he shared some scripture with me. Though he had limited reading skills, he seemed to have memorized long passages of the bible. *Amazing!*

George was also an auto mechanic who operated out of a shack near Gainesville that had a junk yard with various car parts in the back. I remember he also had a goat tied by behind his shack. *An amazing place: an amazing man!*

He helped me out of many jams over the years, sometimes fixing my rattle-trap car for nothing, and one time rescuing me when my car broke down in the woods beside a country road where I was making out with a teenage girl in the back seat. She was with the NAACP youth Council, and participated in our demonstrations. This was actually a dangerous situation, because we constituted a mixed-race couple and if we were discovered we might have been beaten or worse.

It was a different era.

Another image that stands out in my mind is passing through the Jacksonville bus station and noticing the white and colored signs on the drinking fountains in the terminal.

One of the most striking events that occurred in Gainesville came when we were picketing the segregated *CI Cafeteria* next to the campus on the very day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. They had a TV on in the *CI* and when the news report came of the assassination, I recall the patrons inside cheering. As for us, we dropped our signs immediately, and hurried back to our apartment to watch the news.

I recall a similar incident when I was a VISTA Volunteer in Southern Illinois and at softball game news spread through the crowd of Martin Luther King's assassination. You guessed, it, many of the spectators cheered. I remember that my VISTA roommate at the time lost his cool and threw a chair through the window of our trailer.

Perhaps involvement in the movement at that time took my focus off of school, and my grades suffered. But in hindsight, it was worth it. Instead of remaining insulated on campus, I got involved in the community, and learned a great deal about cultural and political realities. And as I said before, my conscience was manifested in a concrete way--beyond book-learning.

My dad was not pleased with my involvement, though he was a moderate Democrat. I think he was concerned for my safety. We had a huge argument about this one day while on a road trip which, I remember, culminated with a shouting match as we crossed the St. Johns Bridge in Jacksonville. It was one of the rare occasions when we expressed genuine feelings to each other: A sad situation, but true.

Part III:

The Summer I Became Involved in the Civil Rights Movement of St. Augustine, FL

It was the mid-sixties and I was participating in a symphonic drama in St. Augustine as a part of my Drama curriculum at the University of Florida. The outdoor spectacle, called *Cross and Sword*, portrayed the exploits of the Spanish--focusing on Pedro Menendez-- in founding St. Augustine. I had two bit parts--a Spanish soldier and an Indian jumping out of a tree--night after night for two or three months.

To be honest, my focus was not so much on the play as it was on pursuing an actress on the set, as we as the civil rights movement swirling all around us--though I seemed to be the only one paying attention in the company.

At some point, I moved out of company housing and into an efficiency apartment in an historical section of St. Augustine, downtown. There, I prowled a used bookstore nearby and wrote quite a bit of poetry. I also, somehow, hooked up with a group of demonstrators who were intent on integrating St. Augustine's public beaches. As I recall it, Butler Beach was the beach for "*coloreds*" and it was divided by a rope from the "*white beach*." Our intent, as demonstrators, was to cross that barrier in an integrated group, and we did so. The result was that a small convoy of pick-up trucks and beach buggies roared up to us from down the beach, and these counter-demonstrators began to hurl rocks and bottles at us as we waded in the surf.

It was a tense moment, and when the police moved in, *WE* were kicked off the beach, not the attackers. In the aftermath, I recall being interviewed by some FBI agents and them showing me photographs of the counter- demonstrators, asking me if I could identify any of them. I was unable to. In the heat of the moment, who could focus on individual faces? At least, I couldn't.

I also became involved in working with a small group of African-American kids--to facilitate their creativity, through "*creative dramatics*". I directed them in a play I found somewhere based on "*The Wizard of Oz*". We did not perform it publicly, but practiced it somewhere in my neighborhood, perhaps on the sidewalk in front of the funky bookstore I frequented.

One incident occurred that summer that I will never forget: a group of black children were kicked out of a segregated theatre somewhere downtown. I understand that they were sitting in the balcony at the time. I can only imagine the fear they felt in that situation.

Details from that summer are hazy--after all, it was more than forty years ago--but my overall feeling was that the civil rights activity was infinitely more meaningful than the play for (mainly) tourists we put on on Anastasia Island. Again, I learned much more from involving myself in the community than I did from school...

Part IV: **Teaching And Seeking Justice: One Student At A Time**

Many of us who were involved in the civil rights movement stayed involved in social action and remained concerned with justice issues. In my case, I opposed the Viet Nam War and became a *Conscientious Objector*. To some extent, the Viet Nam antiwar movement and civil rights movement dovetailed.

More broadly speaking, I think that many of us learned a valuable lesson: that conventional thinking is not necessarily right thinking, and there are times when a *person of conscience* must stand up against the powers that be--to advance the cause of justice.

Some of us moved--sadly, in my view, away from the nonviolent philosophy championed by Martin Luther King. I was not in that category.

Many of those involved in the movement also sought justice in the workplace. In my case, as a counselor and teacher, I made an effort to stand up for clients and students when I felt they were being treated badly by staff or their peers. I lent support to a gay student who was being tormented by fellow students; also, a Christian student who was ridiculed for reading the bible during her down time. While working with an inmate in a state correctional facility, I made an effort to advocate for an Islamic inmate who told me he was denied access to the diet prescribed by his religion. I sought to smooth the way for black students and white students--in turn, when they were subjected to ostracism by students of another race. I lent support to a student who was marginalized because he openly acknowledged his atheism. I also stood up for an intellectually disabled student who was suspended for defending himself physically when he was harassed, physically.

In many instances, I strived to apply the principle of fair treatment advanced through the movement to issues seemingly unrelated to the oppression of blacks by whites during the late fifties and sixties. And I know I am not the only civil rights activist who made this effort. In many instances, making this effort resulted in conflict between me and other activists, on the one hand, and agents of oppression or indifferent observers.

I want to make clear that I did not take a principled stand in every instance. Sometimes I felt too intimidated or threatened, other times I simply felt that the timing was not right; I tried to pick my battles.

I was not always brave and have guilt about situations where I did not stand up.

Part V:

Involvement in the National Campaign To Elect Barack Obama

The emergence of Barack Obama as a major political figure encouraged me to become involved in a national campaign, for the first time, really. As I repeated over and over during the campaign, and after, what most impress me about Obama are these qualities: integrity, authenticity, creativity, and intelligence. Of course, the fact that he is African-American and was elected president is a source of inspiration for all who seek to advance the ideal of America as a land of freedom and justice for all.

I made thousands of calls for Barack as a national phone banker in 2007-2008. I campaigned on the ground for Obama in South Carolina and North Carolina. I wrote many letters to the editor in support of Obama; about a dozen of them were published in *USA Today*. The Obama campaign brought me into contact with the African-American community in our small town of Kingstree, South Carolina and we worked together to advance his campaign.

It was an inspiring moment when Obama came to our small town to speak at our high school gym. His message was great, as usual. He directed much of his message to parents and kids in our high poverty community, encouraging the kids to "*turn off the electronics and hit the books!*" A great message, because many kids are not using current technology to enhance their knowledge, but rather to immerse themselves in video games, social networking, gangsta` rap, and the like. He advocated a tough love stance with regard to parenting, also a good message, because a shocking number of parents have advocated responsibility for guiding their children.

I was deeply impressed. He did not focus at all on his campaign for president, but rather on the needs of his audience.

When Barack Obama came to the fore as a presidential candidate, a great deal of racism surfaced and was directed at him. Many lies were told about this good man: that he is a Muslim, a terrorist, a non-citizen, a socialist, and repeated over and over on cable new. Fox News was especially culpable in seeking to lend credence to these untruths. I felt, and still do, that a form of neo-fascism is on the rise in America. I developed the idea that "*people of conscience*" must take a stand against socio-pathic media figures and right-wing politicians. I have written about this extensively in my *Open-Salon Blog*, and elsewhere.

I was especially gratified that Obama took a strong position with respect to ending detainee abuse at Guantanamo and other detention facilities. I had written extensively on this issue, having several Op-Eds published. I have a special concern for people incarcerated, that they be treated humanely, whether they be a terrorist, a murderer, a rapist, etc. A society can be rightly judged on how it treats its most vulnerable citizens, whether they be prisoners, children, the disabled, old people, or the very poor. In my way of thinking, this is a fundamental concept of justice: that there must be justice FOR ALL, not just the rich and powerful, any particular ethnic or religious group, sexual orientation, etc. That is one reason why I love America: because we have that ideal. But I feel that self-seeking and bigoted individuals wish to obscure that meaning of what it means to be an American.

I wish to make clear that I DO NOT regard Barack Obama as perfect, and I do not agree with him on every issue. But I am inspired by his basic message, and feel that he is a great leader,

despite the fact that he has been under constant attack by the extreme right and some on the far left, as well.

I only wish Martin Luther King had lived to see his dream realized, with respect to the election of Obama. I think that he would be extremely gratified. Since King's assassination, we have experienced a dearth of leadership in the struggle for civil rights and justice in America. Of course, we have had leadership, but not nearly as inspiring as King's--until Barack Obama emerged on the scene. Anyway, that's my view.

I actually see him doing extremely important work after he leaves office--maybe eclipsing the work he did as president. I could see him as a civil rights leader, or leader on the world stage, maybe even Secretary General of the UN. Laugh if you want to, but that's what I predict.