

One person who agreed to serve on our first Habitat for Humanity Board of Directors was Dr. Murray Branch, formerly a professor at Morehouse College, and then at the Interdenominational Theological Center, a seminary in Atlanta. After Martin Luther King's assassination, he was the senior pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, where Dr. King started the historic bus boycott.

Murray Branch, and his wife 'Mima, became our close friends; they would stay overnight at our farm when they traveled from Alabama to North Jersey, where they had relatives. In 1980, Murray invited me to come down for a weekend and speak at Dexter Avenue Church, which is just a short walk from the Alabama Capitol. The church building is on the grounds of a former slave auction.

As a nursery farmer with no seminary training, I was stunned by this invitation. But Murray kept persisting, and eventually I could no longer say no.

I never worked as hard for a grade in college as I did on two projects for that weekend: talking to a fellowship group that met on Friday nights, and preaching the sermon on Sunday morning. In my head I kept hearing the words God spoke to Moses in Exodus 3:4 — "Take off your shoes; you're standing on holy ground."

Murray and 'Mima met me at the Montgomery airport late on a Thursday night. We drove past the church on the way to their parsonage nearby, and showed me my name and my sermon title, posted on the church's sign out front.

Thus began the most amazing weekend of my life. There were marks on the front porch of the parsonage, showing the area that was repaired after a bomb exploded there. The bed I slept in had a brass plaque on the headboard, commemorating Dr. King, its previous owner. One wall of the church basement is covered with paintings of important people in the civil rights movement—I was embarrassed to find I could only identify some of them.

On Saturday afternoon, I walked to the state capitol. The building's huge entrance area is covered with Confederate statues, some on horseback. Reading the adulatory inscriptions about each man's glorious exploits, and all the blood that was shed, cast a pall over my otherwise wonderful weekend with the Branches.

In the late 1960s, some friends and I recruited a diverse group of women, to take The Green Circle Program for children, developed by Quakers in Philadelphia, to every third grade in our county. As we told a story with a flannel

board—a universal teaching tool in those days—the children would keep adding different kinds of people to their own personal circle. That's why it was green—it kept growing. When one of our demonstrators, a lovely black woman, added a felt cutout figure of her color to the circle, a third grader in the class shouted, "I HATE black people!" We hoped that was definitely a teachable moment.

Once I was asked to demonstrate the program to a local Rotary Club. Afterward, one man raised his hand and asked, "If this program is being done in every third grade, why do we still have racial prejudice?" Well...

We were able to do some work in fair housing, because by this time New Jersey had outlawed racial discrimination in housing. A white friend would visit a realtor, supposedly looking for a home, and be shown plenty of possibilities. Later, a black friend in the same realtor's office would be shown relatively few houses, either rundown or too pricey. Without a realtor, we did finally find a home for this black friend, and our church supplied volunteer repair help.

We made wonderful African-American friends through the Salem County Brotherhood Council, which held monthly interracial potlucks, sometimes at our farm. And Vic regularly played tennis as "the token white guy" with an all-black group of men from Philadelphia. One man in their group had already won every U. S. tournament he'd entered—but back then, the really big tournaments remained closed to him.

In 1982, we helped start in our County the first Habitat for Humanity affiliate in the Northeast. Salem County HFH had a diverse board, and our monthly meetings were held in both black and white churches. We had to start slowly; our rural county does not have a large tax base of donors. Furthermore, the crazy idea that volunteers will give up their vacation time to build houses with poor families, and these houses will then be sold to these new homeowners with no-interest mortgages (Exodus 22:25), was initially a very hard sell. But with faith, amazing things happen. Vic was our county's Habitat treasurer in the early years, and once, just when it appeared we'd have to quit building until we could raise more money, he got in the mail a big check from a Congregational church in New England that none of us had ever heard of. Salem County HFH keeps growing today.

We are grateful to First Congregational UCC Church in Asheville, for keeping the faith on everyone's rights!

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Our Civil Rights Experiences

Diane and Vic Scott



Vic and I met in 1950 at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA, when we were both standing in line for freshman registrations. My own parents had lots of non-white friends—they'd always worked for civil rights. Once they went to a brotherhood dinner in Philadelphia, and bought a book of sermons by the young preacher who spoke that evening. It's autographed: "Regards, Martin Luther King, Jr.," and is something we now treasure.

Vic grew up in an all-white town in the western Pennsylvania mountains; he made his first non-white friends when he joined the Navy right after high school.

Stationed in Memphis in 1949, where he'd already passed signs reading SAILORS AND DOGS KEEP OFF THE GRASS, Vic and a black buddy from Boston decided one evening to go rollerskating. At the door, Vic was told, "You can come in; but he can't." Vic was a civil rights worker from that day on.

In college in the 1950s, Vic became president of the Bucknell chapter of NAACP. I was secretary and membership chair. At that time Senator Joe McCarthy was in his heyday, and he had listed the NAACP, along with many other organizations and individuals, as dangerous Communists. Sympathetic students often said to me, "I'll give you 50¢ for a membership, but don't put my name on your records—it might keep me from getting a job when I graduate." Over one memorable weekend, a carload of us from Bucknell attended a national NAACP convention in DC. We were addressed by President Dwight Eisenhower, and we slept in dormitory rooms provided by Howard University.

Before Vic entered college, he decided he'd never join the foolishness of a fraternity. Then he learned that Bucknell had one fraternity, started by World War II veterans, which was entirely interracial and nonsectarian, and practiced no sort of hazing. He joined. Meanwhile, when I first heard the secret ritual of the sorority I'd joined, I learned that the group was for "white Caucasian Christian women" only. I quit. (Actually, my roommate and I quit at the same time. And we celebrated quietly when, without our GPAs included, the sorority's academic standing dropped the following semester.)

The night of our junior prom, Vic and his interracial fraternity enjoyed a special privilege. Duke Ellington's band supplied the dance music. After the party ended at midnight—and all women students were required to return to their dorms—Ellington and his band went to Vic's fraternity house. They jammed into the wee hours, and then slept at the house.

In 1954, the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision came down on Vic's 23rd birthday. We, as college seniors, were over the moon. We would marry that fall, confident that from now on all children

would attend integrated schools, and prejudices would gradually just fade away. So much for the idealism of youth.

When we launched our nursery farm in southern New Jersey, where we worked for 45 years, we felt we had moved to the Deep South. Then we learned that was sort of true. We were actually located south of the Mason-Dixon line, a vestige of the Civil War, but it was not continued across New Jersey

There was an apartment in the upstairs of our 1840s farmhouse, and for a couple of years we rented it to a black (Negro was the word then) letter carrier, and his wife and little girl. Apparently scandalized, our neighbors in the farm across the road never spoke to us again before they died.

We had an excellent crew of Puerto Rican men living and working on our farm, many of whom returned year after year, because our season, from March into November, ran much longer than the season than the harvesting on most produce farms. Puerto Ricans are American citizens, but many neighbors harbored irrational fears, and some would sic their dogs on our men.

(Local gossips insisted their daughters were endangered. We had three children, including two daughters. Our workers were always polite to them; they even took our son fishing. I loved it when the mother of a neighboring Jewish family told us, "I'd much rather have a houseful of your Puerto Ricans across the field beside us than a houseful of American fraternity boys!")

One day, a 16-year-old from a neighboring farm was playing in the woods with his rifle, accompanied by friends who also had guns. Another neighbor went out and took his son off their lawn mower, concerned for his safety. Suddenly the teenager shot Julio, one of our men, in the chest. Julio had been standing on the back of a tractor-drawn wagon, steadying a load of newly-dug trees, as it traveled slowly down a rural road to our loading area. For days, Julio hovered between life and death in our county hospital. Our family prayed for him each morning. One afternoon our 10-year-old daughter Wendy got off the school bus and raced in to the house, sobbing. An older boy on the bus had yelled at her, "Ain't that 'ric dead yet!?" Blessedly, Julio survived. But he had to return to Puerto Rico with a

bullet lodged permanently in his lung.

Our county had an Interfaith Migrant Ministry program. Several different churches contributed money to pay a part-time Spanish pastor, and services in Spanish were held each Wednesday evening in our own American Baptist church, with concurrent Sunday School classes for children. Teachers were all volunteers, as were refreshment providers, and the drivers who shuttled folks from various farms, plus we rented one school bus. (A friend reported to me that a woman in our congregation said, "I'm always uncomfortable in my pew on Sunday, knowing some farm worker might have sat there on Wednesday." I struggled to be cordial to her thereafter.)

When the teenage shooter's court hearing came up, we were not allowed to attend; he was not yet of legal age. However, our Spanish pastor could, as a translator for our employees who were witnesses. He filled us in afterward. The young man received probation. Sad and frustrated, there was nothing else we could do, except make sure that Julio received a settlement, and that his hospital bills were paid by workers' compensation insurance.

Swimming pools in our county were mostly private clubs, for whites only. We explained to our children that anywhere all our friends weren't welcome, we would not go, either. They accepted this. When a new group of local people started soliciting memberships to build a pool, we attended that meeting. We offered to provide landscaping for the area around the proposed facility, which would certainly need shade, on condition that anyone who could afford the fees could join. That offer was rejected. "Whites only" immediately became part of their rules.

In the 1970s, we bought a neighboring farm. Which meant we needed more housing for an expanded crew. With the approval of the local building inspector, we purchased a defunct and vandalized service station across the road, and began to transform the junk-strewn eyesore into a dormitory which met all New Jersey requirements for migrant housing.

Unknown to us, a petition was circulated by township residents, some of whom lived miles from our farm, which maintained the value of their properties had suddenly plummeted. Their rallying cry was, "Get the ricks out of the station!" We were told, "You are a

blight on the township." The building inspector caved under pressure, swearing he'd never okayed this project. Angry citizens found a technicality in the law, and we were forced to go to court. The judge appeared sympathetic to us, but he had to rule in the protestors' favor. However, he ordered the township to pay all court costs!

Sadly, we had to lay off nine men; they'd lived in the renovated gas station about two weeks. Another loss for the civil rights of American citizens.

Fortunately, our children did have the diverse public schools we'd hoped for. When integration finally happened, there were many experienced black teachers, and principals, who came with that, and our schools in this rural area had some excellent ones. Their classmates were black, white, Hispanic, and Asian.

In 1976, I took minutes at a gathering of more idealists—not young ones, this time. We were writing by-laws to create a new international Christian ministry of housing, to be called Habitat for Humanity.

With Habitat founders Millard and Linda Fuller, I co-wrote three books about this ministry, to help launch the new program. The first book was published in 1976. In 1999, it was exciting to move to Asheville and find that every church we visited had some kind of connection with Habitat. Today, little Guatemala has more than 50,000 Habitat houses—not McMansions, but safe, decent homes. And in Bolivia recently, Habitat workers were able to persuade the national legislature to repeal a law which prevented women from inheriting property. Now, if a Bolivian husband dies, his wife and children will not lose their Habitat house!

When our older daughter Ellen was married in 1979, Patricia Clark, an African-American and her close friend since second grade, was her maid of honor. Pat's father was an illiterate tenant farmer in our township; she won a full scholarship to Smith College. Then she became the first African-American volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, and served two years in Zaire, now called the Democratic Republic of Congo. She's since held many high-profile jobs, including directing Klanwatch at the Southern Poverty Law Center, heading the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Criminal Justice Commission of American Friends Service Committee. Pat also served on Greensboro, NC's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.