

Excerpts from: **Integration Through the Eyes of a Southern Debutante**

(deb-u-tante . . . A young woman making a formal debut into society)

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"Why, she's just as good as I am! I'll tell Dad." That was my reaction upon seeing a black girl in my tennis class at Indiana University in the early 1940s. Of course, it didn't work. Dad never was convinced of the equality of people, no matter how I argued or explained the logic of it. He said, "They like to ride in the back of the bus," and a lot of other things I don't remember.

Dad probably would not have approved of my going north to college, but he was overseas, fighting the 2nd World War. Leaving the South was an eye-opener for me. Never had I seen a black person in a professional position. Our maid was one of the few black people in my life. I sat with her at the kitchen table evenings while she practiced writing her name. I rode with mother to take our laundry to a black woman's house. I vividly remember the poor neighborhood and the small houses with dirt yards. It was not far from our house, but a totally different world.

After I finished college and the war ended, our family came back home to Birmingham. The newspaper ran an account of the season's debutantes, listing my name as one to be presented by the Redstone Club. This was an exclusive men's club, of which Dad was a member, and each proud father presented his daughter to society when she had finished college. The whole idea seemed rather ridiculous to me, but I was anxious to go to dances, find old friends, and meet new ones. Translation: I was looking for a husband!

One of the new friends I made upon returning to Birmingham was a woman who had grown up in the north. She was aghast at the effects of segregation and spoke out against the lack of equality. I told her with great sorrow that she had better not discuss it around my Dad. It was through her that I met my husband.

It wasn't until five years later in 1954 when my husband and I, with our two children, moved to Memphis that things really changed. Memphis was just as segregated as Birmingham, but I was relieved to leave my family and choose like-minded friends. The Civil Rights movement became a defining time, and those of us who believed in equality worked together for peace and justice. Friendships based on these values became lasting friendships.

Memphis schools were integrated when Federal District Judge Robert McRae was given the job of drawing up the plans. Bob and I taught Sunday School together and, as a school teacher, I had taken my U.S. History students to his courtroom on a field trip. He was bitterly attacked for drawing up the plan, but I thought it was a stroke of genius.

To appreciate his plan, one needs to understand how segregation affected the building of schools. Just imagine a wide boulevard, with a spacious lawn, and a very big building with white columns and marble walls.

This is East High School, for white students from kindergarten to high school. Less than a mile away is Lester High School, jammed up on a narrow street, surrounded by a fence and crowded with black students from kindergarten to high school. There was another school in this triangle for white elementary students. Judge McRae simply designated East High School for ALL high school students, Lester became Lester Junior High and the elementary school accepted all elementary students. No bussing required!

My black students were respectful, lively and creative in Art class. Their comments made me realize how little contact there had been with white people. Benny pointed to my freckled arm and asked sadly, "Were you born that way?" I had a lot to learn also. A black teacher next door to me said she had been called by her first name all her life and now wanted me, as her friend, to call her Mrs. Garrison. During that first year at Lester, we felt that we were making history. A reporter from the *New York Times* even showed up.

The next year, I was transferred to East High School, to replace an Art teacher who had been fired. He had given a passing grade to students whether or not they did any work or came to class. It was a shock for students, who had signed up for Art as an easy course the previous spring, to be confronted by me. I assigned homework (in Art?), checked students tardy who finished cigarettes in the hall after the bell rang, and failed students who didn't finish projects. I called up parents to report problems. Conversation at the door of my class: "She called up my mother, said I wasn't doing my work, and now I'm grounded for the weekend!" Another replied, "She called my mother too!" They wailed, "Mrs. Collier, you're COLD BLOODED!"

Excerpts from:

### **A DEGREE FOR MOM**

University of Memphis alumni magazine

When the American Red Cross teaches a water safety class, they expect the students to take what they've learned and go teach swimming lessons and water safety. My first opportunity was to teach the children at the officers' pool, at Hamilton Field Air Force Base in California, where I lived with my family. Dad was second in command of the base.

The classes went well and I planned a ceremony for the kids to show their parents what they'd learned. However, there was a much bigger show going on. General Wainwright was returning from Japan, after negotiating the Japanese surrender. All of us at the pool had a great view of his arrival at the airport, because the pool area was on one of the many hills overlooking the landing strip. So much for a kids' water show!

So California it would be for my third and fourth years of college. Transportation just wasn't available to and from Indiana in 1945. The University of California at Berkeley, just across the bay from us, had 30,000 students and one more was no problem. I found a chapter of the sorority I had joined at I.U. and immediately had a sorority house to live in and plenty of friends. I majored in Early Childhood Education and earned an Associate of Arts degree, representing two years of studies.

When we returned to Birmingham, I became interested in the YWCA and was offered a job, directing "Calico Corner." This was a new venture for the "Y." They wanted to create a place where teenagers could have their own place to "hang out." I spoke at high school assemblies, inviting young people to join our new club. We had a soda fountain, pool table, dance floor and our own band for Saturday night dances. Wade and I were dating by then and he always came to the Saturday night dances and even played pool with some of the guys.

Fast forward about ten years and I'm teaching swimming at a friend's day camp every summer, with two children who were eager campers. They both learned to swim quickly and thrived on the other activities. After many years at the day camp our son went to the Boy Scout camp and our daughter went to the Girl Scout camp; I decided it was time I got a winter job.

So at age 45 I decided to go back to school. This, I thought, would be a good example for our kids. It certainly proved to be true. Our son has not one but two advanced degrees, teaches Law at the University of Florida, and has written several books. Our daughter has a Master's degree and is equally engaged in important work. Both of their spouses have advanced degrees.

But back to my decision to enroll in what was then Memphis State College. My meeting with the counselor for evaluating my credits was really funny. She said I had to take the 2nd semester of freshman English. Now I thought this was ridiculous, but decided I would enjoy it, so offered no objection. (It turned out that each class started with a spelling test--just what I really needed.) When I left the office, another student accidentally bumped into me and apologetically said, "Oh I'm sorry. I should have went the other way." I wondered to myself if he had to take the 2nd semester of freshman English.

One of the classes I had to take was Health and Folk Dancing. The professor asked the students if they would like to meet in the evenings and bring their dates to dance in the gym. Naturally they all agreed with this. I wondered how my husband would respond to my request to be my partner. Good sport that he was, he agreed. As a highly skilled Chemical Engineer, he could do everything imaginable, fix anything that broke, but dance he could not. The final exam for this course was to pick the music and write a round dance. I thought that would be hard. Not so! That was the easy part. Performing it with my husband around the entire gym was the difficult part. He studiously looked at his feet the whole time, while I played the joyful dancer, smiling and pulling him along. Every time I hear “Jingle Bell Hop” I remember that big gym, and dancing all around it.

The crowning glory of my entrance into the academic world again, was that I graduated *cum laude*. With this degree, and additional Art classes, I taught in the public schools for eleven years, knowing that I was still very close to my two children. But most important, I could feel that I had helped integrate the Memphis public schools.