

Please don't take integration for granted

My hobbies and activities tend to put me around large groups of white people of retirement age and of what I would consider a measure of monetary wealth. And sometimes, when I'm surrounded by people who are my direct opposites in terms of age, race and socioeconomic status, I think, "This couldn't have happened 50 to 60 years ago."

It wasn't so long ago that I couldn't have participated in these events or activities as an equal to them. We could have attended the same play, but we couldn't have sat next to each other. At a banquet, I might have been cooking or serving food or cleaning up after the party instead of enjoying the meal alongside them. I'm not saying the latter example is impossible now — I have yet to attend a luncheon or special dinner event at any

downtown Louisville hotel that isn't catered by an all-black serving staff — but two or more generations ago, it would have been my only option.

What's really interesting to me in those situations is that nearly everyone around me is old enough to remember when I wouldn't have been allowed in their presence. No one treats me as if that were still the case or as if anyone wishes it were. I find it hard to imagine that my comrades would have been among the children who threw

rocks at their darker classmates after *Brown v. The Board of Education* changed their schools, among the people who were hostile to blacks staging sit-ins in the 1960s, or among the parents and rioters who protested busing in Jefferson County in the 1970s.

But occasionally it strikes me that if I know so many people who are old enough to remember those days, then many people who lived through the civil rights era are still living. And if people who can give first-hand accounts of pivotal periods in our nation's racial history are still living, then that era isn't as far in the past as we perceive it to be.

I know terms like "long ago" and "far away" are relative, and anyone eligible to receive a senior citizens discount probably would say that he or she is old. But I make this argument because annually, the commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday ushers in a six-week season in which

it's OK to talk about race in America, and every year I hear questions asking why the topic is still up for discussion when we live in a fully integrated society. I hear comments stating that the best solution for race relations in this country is for black people to just get over slavery. It happened a long time ago. No one living today owned slaves or was an enslaved person. A national apology was issued. Get over it.

But our national, regional and local issues with race didn't end with the Civil War in 1865. They didn't end when busing started in the 1970s either. Consider local leaders' concern that the Neighborhood Schools Bill proposed in the Kentucky Legislature would re-segregate Jefferson County's public schools. Furthermore, consider that there would be no need for concern if Louisville's neighborhoods were more heterogeneous, or if 90 percent or more of Jefferson County's residents were white, like much of the

rest of Kentucky.

No, no one from 1865 is still around. But the fight to keep certain groups of people from freely and fully partaking in American citizenship continued. Civil rights-era witnesses are still living, including those who vehemently opposed integration and who don't see their actions as moral failures. Some have passed their beliefs on to children who imparted the approval of hatred to their children. As bigotry becomes more socially unacceptable, the generations will either disagree, or they will learn to make their efforts more stealth.

So as I hang out with older white people, I don't take integration for granted. They can remember when it wasn't so, and I know it wasn't easy to get to wherever we are today. ♣

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