

Long Way To A Place At The Table



By BOB RAY SANDERS - November 9, 2008

If you've never known the sting of racism or borne the scars of discrimination, you can't begin to imagine how I feel today.

If you never met Jim Crow face to face or looked into the dejected face of a mother who was told to take herself and her child to the back door of a restaurant to be served, there is no way you can understand my joy at this moment in U.S. history.

If you never heard your father curse a system that denied him the basic rights of citizenship while he religiously paid his income taxes, property taxes and, yes, poll taxes, there is no chance of your comprehending this thing exploding within me.

If you are not a descendant of a people forced for centuries to make do with the crumbs that fell from America's bountiful kitchen table, I could never begin to explain to you what the simple fact of Barack Obama's candidacy — much less his historic election to the presidency — means to this native son, who was born black and poor and curious and determined and forever hopeful in a segregated land.

While I was growing up in Texas in the 1950s and 1960s, this is the kind of day I dreamed of but never thought I would live to see.

And yet, as the votes started coming in from across the country Tuesday evening, I realized I was witnessing the dawning of a new era for a country like the one Martin Luther King Jr. had seen from that mountaintop the night before he was killed.

My college-age son said he wanted to go to the polls with me to cast his first ballot. As we drove to the polls, I recalled the first day I had taken him to preschool and fondly remembered the afternoon when he was in first grade and came home to say his class had an election.

Thinking of his future and the future of the country, I also thought of the past and a long list of people who had helped make this Election Day possible.

So when I went to the polls, I was casting a ballot not just for myself but for a bunch of folks who are now gone, including Mama and Daddy.

I was voting for Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass; for Abraham Lincoln and Sojourner Truth; for W.E.B. and Booker T.; for Franklin and Eleanor; for John and Bobby; for Martin and Medgar; and for Cesar and Lyndon.

This election fulfilled the dream of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, the two young Jewish men from New York who would join James Chaney to help register voters in Mississippi and who were murdered in 1964. Thanks in part to their sacrifice, my son and I were able to make that trip to the polls together.

And I can never forget Viola Liuzzo, the young white mother from Detroit who went to Alabama to help in the voting rights campaign there in 1965. She was shot to death as she ferried some young black demonstrators from Montgomery to Selma after that historic march. Her death was not in vain.

Back in 1961, Robert Kennedy had predicted that within "30 or 40 years" a black man could achieve what his brother had accomplished by becoming president of the United States. His prophecy was off by only a few years.

With his assassination, and those of John Kennedy and King, some of us felt that every time hope appeared, it was gunned down.

In Barack Obama and his extraordinary campaign, we witnessed the resurrection of hope. Even the words of Langston Hughes, written long before I was born, took on new meaning:

"Tomorrow I'll be at the table when company comes. Nobody'll dare Say to me, 'Eat in the kitchen,' then. Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed — I, too, am America."