

2015 Black History Month
Delegate Vivian Watts

During Black History Month, most members have presented inspirational stories. My previous presentations celebrated heroines of mine: Barbra Jordan and Marian Anderson. This speech will not be inspiring .. It will reflect the reality of the Black experience in the North as I've witnessed it. Therefore, it won't begin to tell the story of those who lived it and who continue to live it.

Most delegates who've spoken over the years were born and raised in the South. But, as I've listened to commentary about Southern battles for civil rights and human dignity, I frequently thought to myself, malicious discrimination is by no means limited to the South. My decision to try to craft this speech, however, was solidified last year when then-Delegate Algie Howell spoke about how the same test to join his beloved Air Force that he was told he failed in Virginia, he passed in New York with the second highest score. I would offer that his passing might be more to the credit of the changes in the Armed Services by the time of the Korean War than it was to the place where he took the test.

I was born in 1940 and raised in a rural area near Detroit, Michigan. If I saw a black person growing up, it was from a distance – certainly I never talked with one. In those early years, I didn't even have a reason to question the name my grandfather gave to his black dog.

It was not until I became a member of the State Youth Board of the Michigan Methodist Church in 1957 – my office was Christian Citizenship of course (!) – that my world was opened. This was just 3 years after Brown vs. The Board of Education and I chaired the first joint conference of the youth of the white Methodist Church and the youth of the Negro Methodist Church. Yes, they were totally separate. I spent the weekend of the conference in the home of a Negro family in the heart of Detroit. My grandfather never was told what I was doing.

In the course of working on that conference, many “truths” of my up-bringing were challenged. Among them was the truth behind the “fact” that Dearborn (a suburb of Detroit) had no racial problems. Why? because it had no Negroes! In researching historic events for these remarks, I read that the mayor of Dearborn – who was re-elected 15 times – contended in the 1970's, after civil rights prosecution by the federal government, that his new "Keep Dearborn Clean" slogan had nothing to do with continued racial segregation. In fact, however, when he left office, Dearborn, a city with a population of 90,000 in 1978 had only 20 African-Americans.

In my experience, the immutable, historic isolation of African-Americans is the biggest difference between Northern and Southern racism. There are no childhood memories of playing together. Even as public accommodations became open under law, adults didn't and

still don't see each other in "normal" humanizing settings. Just 6 years ago, I spent a week on the road in Michigan, staying in Comfort Inns and Motel 6's, on a route comparable to traveling from Prince William through the Northern Neck then dropping down to head west on 58 to the mountains. Traveling in Michigan, in 2008, I saw only two black people the entire time.

Let me turn back for a moment to the time of my early childhood to underscore the irrational, destructive actions that can come out of failure to know each other as fellow human beings. During World War II, 50,000 blacks and 300,000 whites moved up to Detroit mostly from the South, drawn by the high wages of the booming defense industry. There wasn't housing for over a-quarter of a million people and according to Wikipedia, ethnic groups especially were pressured to resent African-Americans as "threatening their jobs, homes, communities, and churches." It was the Negroes who were forced to live in homes without indoor plumbing and pay rents two to three times higher than families in white districts.

By June 1943 – despite the fact this would be the peak of the war effort – 25,000 whites walked off the job when 3 Negroes were promoted to work side by side with them. Their demonstrated competence to support the troops in America's all out war effort meant nothing.

By end of that same June, a separate chain of events that started on a warm Saturday evening, grew into a 3-day riot that ended only when federal troops were brought in ... again, this was at the heart of the War. 34 people were killed, 25 of them were African-Americans, 17 of whom were killed by the police. Black people accounted for more than 75 % of those injured and 85% of the roughly 1800 people arrested.

I was only 3 years old during all this and wasn't aware of it – or I didn't think I was. But, of course, as I've thought about it, I heard echoes of the racist elements that fed it conveyed – usually subtly – by many of the adults of my childhood.

Where is the state of racism in the North today? (You read the news. I will keep these comments just to my own direct experience.) On that trip 6 years ago with my sister through Michigan, I spoke briefly to the old man on the porch next to our first house, he identified us immediately "Oh, you must be the marine engineer's kids" ... well over 90 years old and sharp as a tack. But in that 5-minute conversation, it was very important to him that I knew that "some of those people tried to move in a few years ago – mother and her daughter – but we made sure she knew she wasn't welcome and they moved out."

What struck me most as I left that encounter was how insidious racism is. At any time, in any place, it can rear its head ... in the North as well as the South.