

Negro Youth and Social Action

By Vincent Baker

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(Vincent Baker, as a youth leader in Harlem, has had unusual experience of critical race situations and how to deal with them in a constructive fashion. He is a leader of **Modern Trend**, an organization formed to answer the communist challenge to youth.)

Several years ago a friend of mine, then a student at Texas State College for Women, was told by another student of an interracial conference which she had attended. She and the white students had sat with Negroes, talked with Negroes and walked along streets with Negroes. "Was this all right?" she asked. My friend, Anne, told her it was.

Anne then decided to do some reading about the race question, and got much of the material from the college library. It was all so simple, so logical, so unanswerable! Of course there were no superior or inferior races! Anne must make the friends and relatives see the light. She felt certain that once she had stated the facts, all would be converted. But they weren't.

There is a lesson in this little story that has an important bearing on what follows. Race prejudice—unChristian, undemocratic, unscientific—arises from ignorance, and education is the cure for it. But, in addition, race prejudice is the material with which a vast and powerful pattern is deeply woven into the fabric of American life. Many people find it to their immediate interest to keep the pattern strong. There is the real estate owner who can charge Negroes exorbitant rents if they live in a certain area. There is the typical political demagog who builds his public career on racism. There is the rich planter who must keep the share croppers fighting among themselves lest they turn on him. And there are the millions of people who, often unconsciously, want the emotional satisfaction of feeling superior to somebody. Deeply woven as it is, the pattern of racism will not give way to education and moral suasion alone. Some Negro young people at least have grasped this, and with some of their white brothers and sisters have done and are doing something about it.

In 1935, a race riot took place in New York City's Harlem area. A false rumor was the occasion for the riot, but the cause was economic hardship, aggravated greatly by job discrimination and high rents. Negro leaders deplored the riot, but realized that something must be done to remedy the conditions which caused it and might cause others. The owners of the stores on 125th Street, (Harlem's shopping center) were asked to fill new jobs with a high percentage of Negroes. With few exceptions, they either evaded or stubbornly refused. A committee was formed and the stores were picketed, the pickets carrying signs urging the public to boycott places where Negroes could not work. The effort succeeded. The stores changed their policy.

In 1941, as the nation responded to President Roosevelt's plea to become "the arsenal of democracy," attention was focused on the fact that

what were to become defense industries, almost without exception, hired Negroes only for the most menial tasks or not at all.

Appeals to industrial leaders proved fruitless. The Federal Government refused to act of its own accord. Finally, A. Philip Randolph, International President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, called on the Negroes of the nation to march on Washington—peacefully—on July 1, unless a Presidential proclamation banning discrimination in defense industries and governmental departments was forthcoming before that date. Young people flocked to the new movement, joining its various committees and contributing mightily to its work. Realizing how embarrassing a march on Washington would be at a time when the United States was arming itself and other nations to resist the spread of racism, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, which contained the provisions demanded.

Despite the fact that Northern States have laws banning discrimination in public places, the practice has had to be fought relentlessly and still persists in many places. Several years ago, a group of Negro students from Wilberforce, a Negro school in Xenia, Ohio, and a group of white students from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, decided to end discrimination at a Yellow Springs theater. The Negroes entered in small groups and sat in the Jim Crow section. The last of these groups, however, sat in the section where only whites were seated. When the manager made the expected protest, the Negro students who had sat in the Jim Crow section rose as one and dispersed among the whites—among Antioch esting to note, that, on the one hand, the owner contended that white people would resent having to eat with Negroes so much that they would boycott his restaurant and, on the other hand, that such mingling would lead to intermarriage.

At last the Committee of Racial Equality decided on a "sit-down." A white group entered the place in twos, threes, and fours. Then came the first interracial group. They remained standing while people coming in after them were seated. Then came another interracial group. They remained standing for a long time, the other participants refusing to leave their seats until the latest group was seated and served. The owner called the police three times, until finally he was threatened with arrest if they were called again, for students where possible. The manager muttered threats, but the students, each equipped with a copy of the Ohio Civil Rights Law, did not move, and did not argue. When the show was over, the students drafted a letter to the local newspaper congratulating the manager on his change of policy. So ended discrimination in that theater.

A prominent restaurant in Chicago did not serve Negroes, despite the law. This was learned when an interracial group went there to eat. The owner refused to discuss his policy with them. Two white women from the Committee of Racial Equality, of which the first group were also members, went to the restaurant and talked to the owner. He said that his white patrons would not eat there if Negroes were served, that white women especially would resent it, and that furthermore such mingling might lead to intermarriage,

to which he was opposed. The deadlock was broken when an elderly woman, not connected with the project, offered her seat to one of the colored girls, who accepted. Several whites connected with the project followed suit. At length only two members of the last group remained standing. One of the hostesses seated them. When this happened, the other customers burst into spontaneous applause. Today there is no more discrimination.

It was widely believed that the Palisades Amusement Park in New Jersey did not admit Negroes to the Dance Casino. Modern Trend and the Committee of Racial Equality decided to make a test and to invoke the New Jersey Civil Rights Law if discrimination existed. The participants were divided into three groups—all-white, all-Negro, and interracial. The whites were, of course, admitted without difficulty. The Negro group was informed that the "Turf Club" had the Casino for the evening and only members were admitted. The group's spokesman asked how they might join and they were told to go to the Administration Building. Here they were informed that it was too late in the season for them to join. The club, it was said, sold \$25 season memberships, and it was late August then. But when the white group came out of the Dance Casino and went, upon instruction, to the Administration Building to inquire about getting into the Casino (the people there didn't know that they had been in, of course) they were told to walk right in. Nothing was said about the Turf Club. The case was submitted to the Grand Jury, but the Park changed its policy before the Grand Jury acted.

Some Negro youth in the South, where law and the public are hostile, are actively interested in the war on racism. In 1944, after Georgia extended the vote to 18-year-olds, a large number of Negro young people went in a body to register. Registration proceeded without violence. In May, 1944, a Modern Trend chapter was formed in Atlanta, Georgia. It became highly active in a short time. Following the Supreme Court's decision invalidating the white primary, racial tension rose in Atlanta. A riot on Primary Day was freely predicted. Atlanta Modern Trend carried out systematic visiting of places where Negroes assemble, and informed the people that the situation would be handled in the courts and that violence would only hurt the cause whose victory they all wanted. There was no riot. And the battle is being waged in the courts. Scores of thousands of Negroes voted in Georgia last year. Numbers will grow.

I have mentioned but a few battles. There are many, many more. Some are won, some are lost, but the struggle goes on. This is a war no less important than the great contest of arms which ended two years ago. That contest preserved the hope of true democracy. The fight for racial equality can make that hope a reality.

Editor's Note: We are indeed grateful to Mr. R. T. Malone, president of the Lincoln Urban League, for contributing this article written by Vincent Baker. A number of articles and material used during this first year came as a result of Mr. Malone's interest and concern. Perhaps someone, after reading the article will take steps to check the race-baiting which appeared in a four-column auction sale ad this week in the Shopping Guide.

JITTER



By Arthur Pointer

LITTLE REGGIE



By Margarita