

Mike Randall: unhumiliated super-nigger

by Steve Kadel

Reprinted from the Omaha World Herald
Magazine of the Midlands.

His childhood is a memory of one-room apartments with plaster peeling from the walls. Of stinking tenements where cockroaches vied for prominence with addicts jabbing heroin into their arms. Of the feeling of despair that comes from growing up poor and black in New York's Harlem.

For Mike Randall, a University graduate who hopes to be a teacher, childhood wasn't happy. It wasn't filled with sunny afternoons and family outings in the country. There were no carefree illusions—only stark realities. But it prepared him to face what every black man inherits... a lifetime of playing the color game.

RANDALL NEVER KNEW his father and wouldn't recognize him if they met today. His father left home shortly after Mike was born, returning only once after failing to pay child support.

"We used to move a lot," he said of those early years. "Until I was eight I never lived in a place for more than a month. We'd move every week or two, around the corner or across the street. The trick was to move to a new place so we didn't have to pay rent. My mother used to say it was because we were gypsies."

Because he had no father and a working mother, Randall spent most of his time living with relatives.

"One time my grandfather got sick and let me stay with some of his friends," Randall recalled, "and they were my parents for a whole year. The funny thing was, when my mother came for me I didn't want to go with her."

AT THE SAME TIME, the New York ghettos were taking care of Randall's education. He received expert tutelage from other boys in the neighborhood, most of them several years older and much more experienced than he. They protected him and taught him how to survive in the streets.

"It's one of the norms of the ghetto that you're either a good worker or a good thief. I was really a good thief," he said.

Eventually he reached Boys High School in Brooklyn, a fact that amazes Randall today when he remembers his numerous expulsions from junior high for fighting. At Boys High, predominantly black and a perennial athletic giant, he found a specialized athletic atmosphere. He remembers it vividly.

"In junior high school I was more or less what you'd call super-nigger. I was on the tumbling team, boxing team and was captain of the track team. When I got out I went to Boys High because that's where the super-niggers went," he said.

ATHLETES WERE the heroes at Boys High. Instead of pointing out the scholars who had gone there before, it was the athletes such as Tommy Davis and Connie Hawkins who were glorified.

"School was there to get you ready to go to college for athletics," he said.

There was the belief that sports gives all blacks a way out of the ghetto. For those few with enough interest and ability in athletics, Randall included, it was a chance for a college scholarship. But for the rest, Boys High did little more than keep them inside when all they wanted was to get out and hustle a dollar.

"It wasn't barren," Randall insists. "The opportunity for education was there, but the motivation was lacking. The teachers really didn't care about teaching, they were just interested in making some money. As a result the kids didn't know anything about that. They couldn't see school being any help to them."

BUT AFTER BECOMING city champion in the mile and Brooklyn champion in the two-mile, Randall found that being super-nigger has some advantages, not the least of which was a scholarship offer from Nebraska, which he accepted at the urging of his coach. Still not sure what lay ahead, he was on his way to Middle America.

"I didn't know what to expect from Nebraska because to New Yorkers at that time, talking about Nebraska was like talking about Alaska," Randall said. "Most of us even thought Nebraska was over near Seattle. When I found out it was in the middle of the United States I was really freaked out."

When he got to Lincoln he was warned by other black athletes about problems he would have and restrictions that would be imposed on him by a white, middle class University. Social life would be the biggest problem, they said. Since Nebraska doesn't recruit black scholars as actively as black athletes, there would be few black girls to date, and the coaches discouraged dating white girls.

THESE PROBLEMS were real when Randall was a freshman in 1966, but now he says things are different. Most of the old taboos are still there, but

today's black athletes are more militant and refuse to accept them.

Randall admits that he was lucky to have the track team as a sort of brotherhood then. It eased the transition.

"Without it I might have been in trouble," he said, looking back. But once out of his track suit Randall found Lincoln somewhat less than a friendly midwestern city.

"I've almost been run over many times and it wasn't by accident because it's just happened too often. One time I was crossing the corner of 12th and Q when the light was green and the guy tried to run over me. He just waited until I got out there," Randall said, his voice rising as he remembered the incident.

That is the epitome of the black situation, according to Randall. He saw the driver of the car but was so upset he couldn't recognize him or get the license number.

ALL I WANTED to do was strike out and tear him and the car to pieces because he tried to kill me," Randall said. "That's the situation the black man is in... it's like white people having cars and trying to run over him and he can't do anything about it."

He lowered his eyes and stopped speaking, as if sensing the uselessness.

Randall is a thin, small-boned man who dresses well with a hint of African pride in his wardrobe. His hair is cut moderately short. He lives in a small apartment five blocks from the UNL campus with his wife Linda, who is white.

The walls of his living room are saturated with black sentiment: pictures, quotations and posters—one reading "Free Angela Davis." A large bookcase against one wall spills its contents onto the floor. Books, magazine articles, pamphlets and newspapers lie everywhere, giving the room the appearance of a perpetual conference on race relations. Almost all of the literature is concerned with the black struggle.

IN A SMALL ROOM behind the kitchen, Randall stores his most personal literature in a meticulously-kept filing cabinet. These are stories, essays and poems he has written. Mirroring his soul, they reflect the black man's frustration and pain.



THE DAILY NEBRASKAN
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1971 LINCOLN, NEBRASKA VOL. 95, NO. 15

"Can you imagine
Being a Chicano
An Indian
Or a Black
And being sent to the schools
Of your conquerors
To learn how they conquered
You:
And what do you do once you've
Learned how to conquer from your
Conquerors?
Well, you love them,
Do for them,
And die for them,
Willing.
You even conquer your
Own people for them,
Can you imagine
Being that
Conquered?"

Well, I can imagine,
I'm Black."

—M.R.

He glances at his wife, asleep on a bed tucked into a corner of the small bedroom-living room. She also knows the feelings of being conquered. She has been denied jobs, kicked out of apartments by landlords and has endured taunts of "white trash" because she married a black. Once in Philadelphia they were picked up and brought into police headquarters in a patrol wagon for questioning.

"Why? For suspicious behavior," Randall said sarcastically. "We were sitting in the same car together. This was before we were married and the police kept asking her these ridiculous questions like why is she marrying a black man and is that the normal thing to do in Nebraska?"

DESPITE THE ABUSE he receives from a hostile society, Randall is remarkably easygoing in his approach to a solution. He likes some of the ideas of both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, but he has some trouble seeing himself in the cliché role of a black militant, with its aura of violence.

Turn to page 7.