The Washington Post

MATTER OF PRINCIPAL SHATTERS SMALL-TOWN ILLUSION OF RACIAL HARMONY

By Sue Anne Pressley
April 11, 1994

WEDOWEE, ALA., APRIL 10 -- Springtime is at its most delicate in this two-stoplight town, the green hills iced with the white blooms of dogwood. But the townspeople here seem not to notice the gentle beauty. They are anguishing instead over an issue of race and relationships that threatens the foundations of the place they call home.

The controversy involves Principal Hulond Humphries, who has ruled Randolph County High School with a strong will, a larger-than-life community presence and a well-used wooden paddle for the past quarter of a century.

At an assembly of juniors and seniors on Feb. 24, Humphries threatened to cancel the spring prom if any interracial couples planned to attend. When Revonda Bowen, a student with a white father and a black mother, stood up and asked who she was supposed to bring as a date, Humphries allegedly replied that she had "a problem" and called her "a mistake."

Initially suspended with pay by the county school board, Humphries was reinstated on March 31, a decision that prompted many black parents to

withdraw their children from school in protest. For the past week, as many as 100 of the boycotting students have attended "freedom schools" set up in two black churches and run by volunteers. They vow not to return to Randolph County High until Humphries is gone.

The case has divided residents of this town of 800 and the surrounding countryside along largely racial lines, shattering long-held illusions of togetherness and forcing even the most reluctant observers to choose sides. In this setting, Hulond Humphries is viewed either as an unapologetic racist who should have been stopped years ago or as a strong leader who was worried only about recent interracial fighting at the school and motivated by rumors that more violence might disrupt the prom. Humphries, 55, has refused to comment.

Gene Grant, 54, who is white, describes the principal as the equivalent of "the town doctor," a community fixture who can be seen flipping hamburgers at local charity events and reaching deep into his own pockets to help his students, regardless of race. Eva Laney, 45, who is black, sees a darker side to his prominence.

"I'm surprised one person has so much power in a little bitty town," said Laney, who has placed her 13-year-old son, Jovor, in a freedom school. "If he had any feeling of respect, he would resign: He can solve the problem. But he is so selfish. He thinks that school belongs to him."

Surely nothing so newsworthy has ever happened in Wedowee (pronounced We-DOW-ee), located in the foothills of northeastern Alabama near the Little Tallapoosa River, about 100 miles from Birmingham. The story,

combining the elements of lingering racism and the Deep South, has attracted droves of reporters to the insular little town -- "stirring up trouble" is the prevailing sentiment among whites -- and residents admit they were shocked one evening to find that developments in Wedowee aired on nationally televised news programs ahead of a story about a serial killer.

"Why has this made such a big mess?" asked Sylvia Grant, 52, who is married to Gene Grant. "They've killed each other in other schools. This is such a small thing. It's not like we're racists."

But black residents who are joining in the protest say that what is wrong in Wedowee has been wrong for decades and that this episode has forced them to realize that they must finally act to change the system. The Justice Department is investigating the case, and officials with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the NAACP are assisting the boycott. Bowen, 16, has sued the principal and the school board, charging racial discrimination.

What happens next in Wedowee is uncertain; tense meetings are being held practically every day. But regardless of the outcome, many residents agree that something fundamental has changed here about the way neighbors regard each other. Too many bad feelings, heretofore hidden, have seeped to the surface.

"I look at my black friends and I feel funny now," said Sylvia Grant. "I don't know what their deep, dark feelings are."

The people who are against Hulond Humphries say that this confrontation

was a long time in coming. Everyone still talks about the practice employed at the school for years, until a county NAACP protest ended it in 1988, of high school students riding "a black bus" or "a white bus" to vocational classes at another facility. Humphries supporters deny that the segregated buses were the principal's idea, arguing that once again he had been concerned about fighting and ordered students to choose a bus and stick to it. It was not the principal's fault, these supporters say, that all the black students chose to ride on one bus with their friends.

Charlotte Clark-Frieson, the president of the Randolph County chapter of the NAACP and the first and only black on the seven-member county school board, finds those explanations laughable. "They're having to fabricate an excuse for him, after the fact," she said. "All his supporters are trying to recast things." Many of those supporters refer to Clark-Frieson, who lives 12 miles south in the larger town of Roanoke, as "an outsider" and "a radical."

But aside from buses and proms, many black graduates and current students of the school say they have been disturbed by more subtle signs that Humphries may be prejudiced against them. About 250 of the school's 700 students are black. Transfer student Kane Stribling, 17, said Humphries took one look at his student transcript last fall and told him, "You're never going to amount to anything."

Joyce White, 34, said she wants better things for her children than her own high school experience with Humphries. White, a factory worker, has enrolled Shieketa, 16, and Calvin, 6, in a freedom school: It is the first act of public protest of her life, she said.

"I know how he is. I know the kids aren't lying about what happened in that assembly," White said. "If we don't stop him, he may hurt more kids. The black kids around here don't stand much of a chance anyway."

The people who support Hulond Humphries say it is a shame that a man of such dedication is being so vilified.

"He's a good man. He whupped my boy and I'm proud of it. He made a man out of him," said Edward Sutton, 55, who is white. To hear people talk, Humphries must have paddled nearly everyone, black and white, who passed through the school hallways, for infractions ranging from fighting to a bad attitude; supporters describe his disciplinary techniques as a positive sign of order and control.

They also emphatically deny that he is a racist; he simply reflects, some say, their own beliefs that God did not intend for people of different races to date and marry. "I was always raised that blacks stay with blacks and whites stay with whites," said Sue Carroll, 44, who is white. "That's the way my mother raised me and that's the way I raised my kids and that's the way I believe is right. And we appreciate Mr. Humphries standing up for that."

But at one of the freedom schools, housed in a country church with peeling trim paint, Shieketa White and Kane Stribling and other students say that they wonder why so many people don't realize that this is a larger issue than just who brings whom to the prom. It is about respect, they said, and entrenched power, and the ways that well-meaning people can be blinded to their own prejudices.

"I'm not mad at anybody," Stribling said. "I just feel real bad that so many things haven't changed."

0 Comments

The Washington Post

Be the first to know.

Our award-winning journalists are there when the news breaks.

Try 1 month for ~~$10~~ $1

Already a subscriber? **Sign in**