

All of Winona, Mississippi Votes

All of the Haynes grandchildren gathered around Gran before it was bedtime. As usual during their summer stay, Gran was going to tell them a family story.

“It is important for you young people to learn about your past so that you can appreciate it and all of the history that comes from it,” began Gran. “This story takes place in 1957 in my hometown of Winona, MS. This was a long time ago. You all probably cannot imagine an America where you could not share the same schools, or restrooms, or seats with white people. During the time in Mississippi, if you didn’t get out of the way for the white people on the sidewalk you might possibly get lynched or attacked. In the world of Jim Crow, we couldn’t even vote. But the summer of 1957, your great grandfather, my father Reverend McClendon, or Daddy B voted.” Gran looked off at the picture of Daddy B on the wall. She began to paint a portrait of the south during the Civil Rights Movement for her grandchildren.

“We need to demand our right to vote! We cannot just sit back and let another election year pass by without the black vote!” argued Brother Johnson.

The year was 1939 and members of the Winona Greater Faith Missionary Baptist Church were holding their monthly politics and civics meeting.

Brother Johnson continued, “I do not know about the rest of y’all but this year I plan to vote or at least try to! I’m tired of this life of restriction, I’m smart and educated, I just happen to be black! I’m going down there to vote on Election Day!”

“Calm down Brother Johnson,” said Brother Kirk, “I want to vote just as badly as you do, but we have to think this out rationally. These white men are in charge of everything in this community, even the law is on their side. We need to find a way for the black community of Winona and of all Montgomery County to come together for this cause.”

“We can all come together and vote!” argued Brother Johnson.

“I have a family, and I don’t want to put them in any danger,” said Brother Smith, “I’m with you all but I have to think of my family first.”

“But Brother, if we don’t move now, your family will never see freedom,” argued Brother Johnson.

My mother and most of the other ladies of the church usually sat quietly, watching and listening to the men folk talk. All except for Ms. Winters, a high school English teacher for the county schools who was very opinionated. As Ms. Winters rose to speak, one of the ladies to the right of my mother mumbled, “Here she goes talking while the men folk talking with her radical ideas! That’s why she ain’t married yet; the girl got too many opinions.”

“We need to vote,” stated Ms. Winters, “The black children of our community need to see that we can organize and be successful. We may not be able to vote this time, but we sure do need to try. It can be the first step of many for equality in this town and this county!”

Murmurs and mumbles roared across the sanctuary. A lot of people wanted to know how Ms. Winters, who had no children, knew so much about what the black children needed.

My father, your grandfather, and reverend of the church usually served as a type of moderator for these meetings. He was 6 feet tall, he was young but his wise persona gave him more age. To me he seemed and looked unstoppable, like he was the strongest man in the world.

Daddy stood, fixed his coat, and said, “I agree with Ms. Winters that our children do need to see us organize and be successful. My brothers and sisters, we must band together on this issue. Any separation is a sign of weakness. Our action must be taken peacefully, organized, and inconspicuous. That means we will be peaceful in voting or protest, organized with the other churches, and we will not speak of this in the streets. As minister here, I believe the first step is

to contact all other black ministers in the county and get them on board with this plan. Does everyone agree?"

"Yes," the sanctuary responded.

"In that case, this meeting is adjourned," said Daddy.

When we arrived home that night all of the children were sent to bed but I could hear Mama and Daddy talk in their room. Mama was talking about the meeting and which families were there and which ones weren't. "I wonder where Hattie Mae and Peter were; they usually attend," said Mama.

"You know Mr. Carter has Peter working all types of hours for hardly any pay now, and Hattie Mae never goes anywhere without him," said Daddy.

Their conversation continued like this for about thirty minutes. Meanwhile in my room, my sisters Love and Doll crowded me in the bed. Then I heard Mama volunteer to help Daddy with the letters and calls to the black ministers. I heard Mama say, "You know I support you no matter what the outcome of this plan. I believe that you are doing the right thing in this."

"Daddy said, 'Thank You dear. This may bring about changes or it could make the situation here in Montgomery County worse.'"

As a young girl, I couldn't completely understand how it could make the situation worse, but I did understand that because my parents were colored that they were not allowed to vote. Over the next few days there seemed to be a change in the atmosphere amongst the coloreds. No one spoke of the big plan, but everyone seemed to nod their head or smile to acknowledge those who were in on the plan. Mama was typing up letters and Daddy was visiting different churches and ministers to try to get as many blacks as possible to join the plan. Even at school, my classmates and I stood on the playground and discussed the plan.

“My parents said that they were going to do everything in their power to help your Daddy with the plan Janie,” Mary Sue said to me.

I replied, “Good, cause they sure need it, they been up real late at night trying to get this plan ready, and come up with more ideas for the people.”

“My parents said that the plan is too dangerous and that they best not participate cause they said ain’t nothin’ gonna change,” Anne chimed in.

“You never know if you don’t try,” I replied. I couldn’t understand how some people could have no vision or hope. I thought everyone would be trying to push towards voting and gaining rights.

“If I were old enough to vote, I’d go down there and vote and beat up every white person that tried to get in my way!” declared Bobby. There were a lot of cheers from the boys following that statement.

That day a lot of us children decided that we wanted to somehow help our parents with their plan. Maybe we could at least make signs for the protestors.

When recess ended, it was time to go back into the classroom. Mrs. Brown, our teacher told us that it was time for history.

“Today class we are going to do something different,”

Mrs. Brown began. “We are going to learn about slavery.” For us, this was the first time that someone had decided to deviate from the hand me down white history textbooks and teach us something about ourselves. Mrs. Brown had been at the meeting the other night, and it was clear to us that the meeting had affected what she decided to teach us. That day we learned how slavery began and how our ancestors were captured from Africa. It was the first time our young eyes were opened to the history of our people and the extent of racism in America.

After school that day, my siblings and I stood outside of Daddy's barber shop while we waited for him to finish up. The men folk there chatted about the plan.

"Rev, this is a good thing you tryna do brother", said Mr. Washington as Daddy shaped up his hair. "You have my full support; I even got my baby brother coming home from Valley State on the day of the elections."

"Thanks brother, I appreciate that", said Daddy.

"To me, this is probably one of the biggest steps to be taken towards equality in this town or county", said the elderly Mr. Caldwell. "I've lived here in Winona, MS all my life, and I've never voted, not even once. I guess you could say it was fear. I never thought I would see so many of us come together for a cause like this."

"That's right, Caldwell," agreed Mr. Sterling. "You and I and some of the older folk been living in this town and our parents didn't vote and neither did their parents. It's a shame how we've been done. Doing all the work around here for the white people, from our ancestors being slaves to our wives being nannies for their babies!"

"But ya know what's funny is that some of the white folks don't believe all that racist stuff is right either, they just as scared as us blacks to say something about it. They don't wanna be called no 'nigger lovers," said Mr. Caldwell. "It would be something if one day we could get some of them on our side."

"Maybe one day we will," said Daddy, "but until then, I guess we'll just have to fight our battle by ourselves."

Soon it was time for the monthly meeting again. This time our church was packed with ministers from every corner of the county. There was a loud excited chatter going throughout the sanctuary, but when Daddy got up to open the meeting with prayer the chatter ceased.

“Thank you,” said Daddy. “Let us begin with prayer. Lord thank you for allowing us all to meet here tonight. Thank you for helping us to organize ourselves and please help us to continue to work efficiently as a unit. Lord please be our guide as we face difficulty in the times ahead. In Jesus name I pray, amen.”

“Amen,” replied the sanctuary.

Then Daddy began to make a speech. “Brothers and sisters, thank you for gathering here today. We are trying to begin a journey here in Montgomery County that has never been done before. None of our ancestors here have ever voted. Technically, the law says that we can vote, but unfortunately we have unjust people controlling the laws. Brothers and sisters, we cannot continue to live in this oppression, we have to break through.”

Daddy continued to speak and I glanced around the sanctuary. There were people nodding their heads, clapping, smiling, and hollering. Some people like Mama were even misty-eyed. I could sense that something big was going to happen.

“Let us remember that someone has to take the first steps for equality in this community and let’s make these first steps next week at elections,” Daddy concluded.

Then each minister got up to the pulpit to introduce themselves and their families. They also stated how ready they were to be a part of the plan. Next, Daddy announced the itinerary for the Election Day.

“On election day, various numbers of us will take turns protesting and voting. For example, if you would like to vote first, but then protest at another time, write your name beside the times that you would like to participate. Also, we need a committee of wives to sign up to prepare sandwiches and meals while the voting and protesting is going on. My wife has typed both signup sheets and signing will begin after the meeting is adjourned,” Daddy said.

After the meeting was over and the sign up process began, I peeked out of the doors of the church and saw a white man getting out of his truck. I wondered what he was doing in our neighborhood and I immediately feared that he had been spying and was going to ruin the plan. He cursed, kicked his car, and popped open its hood. I sighed in relief; he hadn't heard anything, and I was especially glad when he drove off.

In the days that led up to the election, there was an excited whisper among the blacks in town. The men and children were painting signs, the women were cooking nonstop so that there would be enough food to feed the voters and protesters, and the children looked on with excitement.

Finally, it was Election Day! Daddy got up extra early so that he and the others who planned to vote and protest in the morning could walk in a group. Mama gave him a bucket of biscuits so that they could have something to munch on if they got hungry. Before he left, Mama gave him a kiss and a hug and said, "You be safe out there now, and promise me if it looks like it's getting dangerous you'll come on home. Remember, you have me and four daughters and a son."

Daddy chuckled a bit and said, "I promise. And you kids be good today ya hear me!" When it was time for us children to go to school, all my baby brother Junior could talk about was how Daddy was such a hero and if he was big enough he would've been out there too. You should've heard him!

"If I were big enough, I'd be out there just like the rest of the men," said Junior. "I'd really show those white people something!"

"Calm down Junior," my sister Tootie said. "It's a peaceful protest and anyhow Mama told Daddy that if it did look like it was getting dangerous that he better leave. Besides right now

the only something you better be showing to anybody is your homework!” Those two began to bicker as usual.

“Tootie you take the excitement out of everything!” exclaimed Junior.

“I’m just telling it how it is!” Tootie argued back.

“Remember, Daddy said be good!” I exclaimed. But like Junior, I secretly wished that I could do something to help, that I could vote too. But I figured that was the point in Daddy and the men going, so that one day we could vote and not have to protest to do it. “

Daddy told us what happened at the poll later when he came home.

“That morning when we arrived, there weren’t that many whites up there at the poll. All of them were in one line to vote and we were in the other. They must have given us the strangest looks you could give people. I wasn’t sure if they were shocked to see us there or if they were angry that we were there,” said Daddy.

One of the white men finally broke their silence and came over by us and said, “What are you niggers doing up here?”

Another said, “You niggers trying to vote ain’t gonna change nothing!” And then he spit in their faces.

Instead of answering the whites’ ignorance, Daddy and the other men stood strong and held their heads high. The protesters for that morning lined up outside of the building with their signs that read things like : “Coloreds deserve to vote!” “Free the Vote!”, and “Amendment XV 1870- The Right to Vote.”

“Free the Vote! Free the Vote!” chanted the protesters.

Daddy and the coloreds who were inside of the poll silently cast their votes one by one and walked out of the building to join the protesters.

By midday the cops had arrived.

“We shall overcome, we shall overcome!” sang the coloreds.

“Now you boys stay peaceful, and we’ll let you be”, said the cops but if any one of you put a nigger hand on any of these white people or say anything disrespectful to them, you’re going straight to jail.”

Daddy and the others were surprised by this response from the cops.

“I thought for sure they were going to beat us and put us in jail!” exclaimed Mr. Hill.

“What are you doing just standing there?” asked one white man as the cops walked away. “Arrest them! These niggers have no right to be here trying to vote and ruin our county!”

The police officer answered him, “Sir, we were instructed to make sure things don’t get out of hand. We have not been given any orders to arrest these boys.”

“Well, I guess if the cops won’t do anything about it, we’ll just have to do it ourselves!” the white man said.

The white crowd behind him agreed, “Yeah, yeah!”

“We’ll let you niggers have your day, but remember the night is ours!” threatened the white man.

The men were slightly shaken by the threat, but they refused to defer from their mission.

“Honkeys,” muttered Brother Johnson. “I knew there would be threats when we signed up for this thing, but I’ll be darned if I let another man scare me! I’m a man too!”

“True,” replied Daddy, “Plus we should fear nothing but God.”

After the polls closed, Daddy told the men, “We were threatened, but thank God we made it through the day! Let’s go home, rest, and celebrate! However, everyone keep an eye open for anything that looks suspicious tonight. God bless.”

After Mama and Daddy tucked us into bed, I tossed and turned. I wondered if everything would be alright. I worried that the KKK would come for Daddy. What if something happened to my friends and their families?

“RING RING RING”, went our telephone. I knew something had to be wrong because nobody ever called that late.

“In front of the church?!” I heard Daddy exclaim. “Are they leaving?! Whenever they leave let me know so that we can go put it out!”

Outside I heard a clickity clack, clickity clack. I peered out of my window, I saw the Ku Klux Klan in their bright white robes. Some were on horses and some on foot marching down our street. Their torches cut through the darkness of the night. They looked like a mob of ghosts to me. I quickly laid back down in my bed. I thought maybe if I just laid still they would all go away and I would wake up from a nightmare.

“Lord please don’t let them hurt anyone!” I silently prayed.

“CRASH!!!!” Something flew through the window in the living room.

“Everyone get to the bathroom!!!” shouted Daddy. “I’m going to stay in the hallway and watch for fire!!!”

In the bathroom Mama said, “Children, grab hands and let’s pray. Lord, we thank you for everything that you have done for us and we thank you for allowing my husband and the other men to vote peacefully today. Father please protect us, our neighbors, and our community. In Jesus name we pray amen.”

“Amen” we responded. We waited silently for Daddy to tell us it was safe to come out.

“RING RING!” rang the phone again.

“Who is this? What do you want?” demanded Daddy as he responded to the caller. The

bathroom was just close enough to the phone to where we could hear a voice scream, “Told you the night was ours nigger!!!”

Daddy slammed the phone down.

“RING RING” it rang again.

“Stop calling here!” yelled Daddy. “Oh hello Mr. Washington, yes we are fine. We just had a rock thrown through our window. How is everything on your street? Okay good, and the church? Well that’s better than what I expected, we’ll just have to do some repairs on it.”

Eventually Daddy came into the bathroom with us.

“When can we go back into our beds?” asked Junior.

“Not tonight son, we’ll have to sleep in here just to be safe,” replied Daddy.

The next day at school the playground was full of talk about the previous night’s events.

“I heard the church was almost destroyed!” exclaimed Sammy “My Mama and Daddy told me that the KKK was gonna be looking for yo Daddy too Janie!”

“Well, they threw a big rock through the window last night. But my Daddy says we don’t have to be afraid of any man. The only person we ought to fear is God,” I replied.

“That’s right,” said Junior, “Y’all shoulda seen our Daddy last night, he wasn’t scared at all!”

On our way home from school, I stopped by Daddy’s barbershop to get money for some ice cream Daddy had promised us a week ago.

“All I’m saying Reverend is that I heard some of Mr. Carter’s white customers talking today. That man who threatened ‘the night is ours’, his name’s Mr. Ashley,” said Mr. Peter. He was down there today saying ‘I don’t think we’ve scared those niggers enough. We ought to

make an example out of that uppity nigger- preacher- leader of theirs. These niggers around here are starting to think they'll run this town.'

Daddy saw me coming through the door, and quickly gave me the ice cream money before he responded to Mr. Peter. As I walked out of the shop, I heard Daddy say, "If it gets too bad, we may have to leave Winona. I'm not afraid of these men personally, but I have to keep my family safe."

My siblings and I were finishing up our ice cream and playing with other children on our street when we heard Mama yell, "Janie, Doll, Tootie, Junior, and Love, y'all come on inside!" We rushed to finish our ice cream and hurried down the street."

"I wonder what Mama wants," said Doll.

"I don't know, but it sounds serious," replied Love.

When we arrived home Mama had the whole kitchen and living room both packed into boxes.

"Grab these boxes and pack everything you own into them!" ordered Mama "We're leaving Mississippi tonight and going to stay with your grandparents in Colorado!"

"Colorado?!" we exclaimed in unison.

"Yes Colorado, now get your things ready! There's no time for extra talk!"

We frantically began to pack up everything. As we packed, Daddy arrived home.

"Honey, we have to leave tonight!" Mama pleaded. "Mrs. McGruder whose husband cleans at the white lunch counter said that the KKK is coming here tonight to burn this house and lynch you! I refuse to stay here and watch you become another George W. Lee!"¹

"I know dear, Mr. Catchings, one of the barbers at my shop has offered to drive

¹ George W. Lee- Reverend mysteriously killed in Belzoni, MS in 1955 after refusing to remove his name from the voting records.

our things to Texas tonight in his truck. We'll stay in Texas a couple of days and then get train tickets to Colorado. Everything's going to be fine Bertha, I promise," said Daddy as he embraced Mama.

As Daddy and Mr. Catchings began loading the truck, I heard daddy say, "Catchings, let the community know at the monthly meeting that I am not leaving a coward. Tell them that the steps we took together were just the first steps of many, they were not in vain. Tell them that one day we will have our rights."

We loaded into the car and headed off for Texas. As I rode I looked at the streets of Winona, MS. I thought about all the meetings, the protestors, and my friends. I knew Daddy was right. One day we would change things and be truly equal.

