

Dr. Eugene Reed and the Battle for Civil Rights on Long Island

by Clinton Grant and John Syffrard

During the 1960's, CORE and the NAACP were the strongest civil rights organizations on Long Island. I used to travel around upstate New York State as NAACP state president. In many places you had a substantial number of whites who were involved in the civil rights movement. But from whites on Long Island, we had minimal support. Most of the branches were all Black. Politically, we were ignored by both parties. The Republicans controlled most things at the time and they pretended as if we didn't even exist. The Democrats had no power. We got lip service from them. We didn't have Blacks holding any significant positions in county or town government.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was started to eliminate racism. My mother was the first President of the first branch of the NAACP on Long Island. That goes back to the 1930's. My mother started the local NAACP when they had a showing of the Ku Klux Klan movie, "Birth of a Nation," in Glen Cove.

Once my mother took my sister, brother, and me to the movie house in Glen Cove. We were little kids. She told us where to sit so she could find us. When we got in there, they told us we had to sit in the balcony, because all colored people had to sit in the balcony. We said, "Mama wants us to sit here where she can find us." My sister got on the phone and called my mother. I remember my mother coming down and raising all kinds of threats and that broke that up.

On Long Island, people who were racists got away with many things when I was growing up. I remember once when I took my girl friend to a restaurant, we went in and sat down. After a while we noticed that we were not being served. When we asked what was happening, they told us that we were under age. We left, but I knew it was not the real reason. I had been there before with white kids and at those times we were served. It was because we were Black.

I remember in my earlier days, my father took us out for a Sunday ride into Hicksville. When we got there, the road was blocked off for a parade. It was a march of the KKK. They were marching down the streets in their sheets. This was not some place down in Georgia. This was right here.

I attended a high school where I was the only Black. I was subject to the usual things in that kind of atmosphere. When I finished high school, I determined that I wanted to go to a Black college. I went to Howard University in Washington DC. It had a whole different atmosphere.

There was a big shortage of dentists in the army. They sent a telegram from the president of the United States saying that if I volunteered to join the army, I could go into any sphere of operation I wanted. I wanted to go to Europe and see what Europe was like. I got orders to go to New Jersey and an officer said they would cut orders for me to go to Japan, because "we can't send colored boys to Europe." I said, "I have a telegram from the President of the United States that says that I can go to Europe if I want to." I said, "I am going to file suit on this." The officer said, "Wait a minute. Be patient. Let me see what I can do for you!" Shortly, I got orders to go to Europe.

When I got to Europe, they had this great big clinic in Munich. But one of the officers took me in his jeep and brought me to an old bombed out building where there was a Black trucking battalion. He told me that this was where they were going to place me. It took them six week before they got anything done. When I left the service, I had built up a lot of resentment.

When I came out of the army, I didn't want to live in Glen Cove. I wanted to go someplace where there was a large Black community, where I could get involved. I heard about Amityville and I came here. I bought a house and immediately got involved with the local branch of the NAACP.

On Long Island in the 1960's we used the courts and direct action to challenge racism. There was a lot of picketing and boycotting and that sort of thing. The major problems were in education and housing. As Blacks, we faced all kinds of obstacles and we still do today. Education for Blacks was different from the education for the whites on Long Island. There was not a single Black teacher in either Nassau or Suffolk county until the fifties. It was a big fight to get districts to hire Black teachers. We overcame that, but still the Black teachers were treated differently from the white teachers.

On Long Island we had de facto school segregation; de facto means that racial segregation wasn't the law like in the south. But communities constructed schools according to the district lines and housing patterns. Black children lived in the same areas so they went to all Black schools.

In Amityville, the Board of Education decided that they would build two new schools in North Amityville. The eastern part of North Amityville was all Black and the western side was white. Instead of building a school in North Amityville for everyone, they built two schools, one on the extreme eastern border of the district and one on the extreme western border. It was obvious what the situation was so we went to court. The Board of Regents finally forced the school board to open one of the schools for kindergarten to 3 and the other for grades 4 to 6. This way all the kids went to school in North Amityville together, the schools were integrated. But we still had the problem of the principals and the staff and how they treated the children. Every year it gets harder. Today racism is not as clearly defined as it used to be so it becomes more difficult to deal with.

In the 1960's, a big health spa had a reputation for not accepting any Blacks. There was one in Massapequa, which is right next to Amityville, so we set up a trap. I went down with a white lawyer. I went in first. They said they had a long list of applicants and they were going to put me the top of the list. I walked out and the white guy walked in. They signed him up on the spot. We filed suit and they settled. They made a public statement that they would not discriminate against anyone anymore and offered me a free membership.

One of the big things we dealt with were the volunteer fire departments because refused to accept Black applicants. They operated like private whites-only clubs. They had to vote you in, but if you were Black, you didn't get voted in. In North Amityville and Wyandanch we were paying taxes to support the so-called volunteer fire departments. These were financed by the taxpayers of the towns and still Blacks could not participate. The fire department in North Amityville is now completely integrated. They even have a Black fire chief. But Wyandanch is still very resistant to integration. It is a Black community but I think they only have four Blacks in a department of almost 70.

Today, Blacks have achieved a much greater role in politics, though not as much as it should be. Some of that has to be attributed to affirmative action. Local governments were required to have an affirmative action program. They were supposed to, but many didn't until they were pressured by the N.A.A.C.P.

Some issues are still unresolved, like police brutality and the different way that police treat Black and white people. I remember once I was driving my sister-in-law, who looks like she is white. There is a little stretch of Sunrise Highway near Brightwater that many people didn't realize was a speed trap. You would be going 55 mph and suddenly you had to drop to 25 mph. I knew it because I was down there a few times. Once, a cop pulled me over for a ticket, even though I was not exceeding the speed limit. He wanted to know who was that woman in my car. I told him that I was the state president of the N.A.A.C.P. I said, "If you want to give me a ticket, do so, but who is in my car is none of your business." He decided to let me go. For years now, I haven't been pulled over to the side of the road, but young Black men are still pulled over all the time.

I think the major problem in America is denial. White people live in a state of hypocrisy. They deny that there is a color line. They claim that everything is rosy and they don't understand why Blacks are objecting and why Blacks are protesting. They feel that Blacks have equality, which we don't. Unless something happens to pull whites out of this denial, problems are going to get bad. We have a rage within the Black community. This is difficult to explain. I think our youth have given up on striving to become a part of the whole system. They don't feel comfortable or that it is possible for them. It just does not look good.