

A Moving Story of Racial Insight

from *Transformation: A White Mississippi Pastor's Journey Into Civil Rights and Beyond*,
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pages 140-142

Dr. Russell Bush, Jr., a white dentist who served on the initial bi-racial committee, recalled his experience with the group and its significant accomplishments. He explained how in early meetings the mayor set the tone for how they should relate to each other. By way of introduction, the mayor went around the table and asked each member to state his or her name and occupation. He emphasized that not only should they address each other as "Mr." or "Mrs." they should show respect for the blacks on the committee by using the term "black" rather than "Nigra." Bush told of a moment when they were helping one of the white members learn to pronounce "Negro" properly, but try as he may, all the man could utter was "Nigra"-- thinking he had demonstrated how he had progressed on that point. His genuine attempt at pronouncing the word properly, although he was not able to do so, somewhat relieved the tension of the moment because of the way the issue was openly addressed.

Bush recalled the discussion in small groups about the most important issue facing the community and the committee. When it came Dr. Bush's time, he wanted to be honest and did not hold back. First he said, "I don't like the language you speak and I don't want your teachers teaching my children that kind of English." In his opinion, not too many of the black teachers at that time were qualified to teach English, simply because of the way they spoke. Then he made a few remarks about "their" perceived morality. He finally said that he drove over every day to pick up his maid, whose "house was in terrible repair. They threw the dishwater out the window." It was not because she did not know better, because "she came to my house and kept it well." To Bush, this was not an isolated case.

When he was finished, it came time for Mr. Lindsey Walker, a black member of the committee, to speak. Dr. Bush recalled that Walker looked at him and said in a quiet, measured voice, "Dr. Bush, I want you to know I do get dirty because I am a brick mason [who worked for the Wolfe brothers' construction company]. When I come home at night, I take my bath, I put on clean underwear, I put on clean socks, and I put on polished shoes for my evening meal. I am a deacon in my church and I have sent my daughters to the University of Michigan." He noted they had graduated. He continued: "You can come to my house after nine o'clock any morning, and the rugs will be vacuumed and all the beds will be made up. And anytime after nine o'clock you would be welcomed to come to my house to drink coffee with me." Finally Walker said, "What do I have to do for you to accept me?" The silence had been broken. Bush said he looked down at his own unpolished shoes and thought Walker had really put him on the spot. He didn't know what else he could say in response. Finally he said, "[T]he only thing I could think of was, 'you'd have to change the color of your skin' and I said that in jest because he had already torn up all the arguments I had!"

A few years later, when Bush retired from his dentistry practice in Columbia, he became a Baptist preacher, serving a congregation in Hattiesburg whose Sunday morning services were broadcast on television. One Sunday Bush told the story of his exchange with Walker in that early bi-racial committee meeting and made the point "Lindsey Walker taught me more about

race relations in that moment than any other person in my life; and it changed my life." A few days later Bush was walking along a downtown street in Columbia, when he saw a red pickup truck approach him and heard a voice from it holler, "Hey, Dr. Bush." When he got over to the pickup he saw that it was Mr. Walker. Walker got out of the truck and said, "I want to shake hands with you. You know I heard what you said on TV and my wife and I appreciated that more than you will ever know." Bush was deeply moved and said, "Mr. Walker, I want to take you out to eat, would you go with me?" Walker said, "[I] would, where can I meet you?" Bush said, "I don't want you to meet me, I want to come to your house to pick you up." And he went to his house and picked Walker up and took him to the most public restaurant he could find in Columbia and sat. down at a table in the middle of the room. There were a lot of other people in that restaurant, and Bush said, "I was the one eating with a black man and they were all giving me the once over." When the staff members from First Baptist Church sat down to eat, Bush took Walker over and introduced him to them, breaking the silence: "I want your to meet my friend, Lindsey Walker."

The two men's friendship and mutual respect grew even deeper and would continue to blossom through the years. It all started that night around the table at the first meeting of the bi-racial committee. Bush said, "I'm not saying how good I was because I was opposed to all that. It was a great lesson I learned that night and I have not changed my position."