

Suburban couple and children receive mixed signals from society on equality

By Ann and Robert Young
Guest contributors

Ann's view

The calendar says this year is 1992, but it could be, to some extent 1940, 1950, 1960 or 1980. I don't include 1970 because that was supposed to be the beginning of a better world for all people.

Barriers that had oppressed my people were supposed to have been eliminated. Dr. King had marched and died for his dream of a just society in which people would be judged by the content of their character - not the color of their skin.

This was a dream in which most Americans wanted to believe. As I look back on the last 31 years of my life, I ask how I could have believed that this dream would be realized in my lifetime? As a people we are still experiencing oppression today.

My first realization that all God's children in this country were not created equal - or, at least, were not thought to be equal - began in a small town in South Carolina some 46 years ago.

Looking back, I can say it was both the safest and the most dangerous time for me and my family. Safe because everyone in my community looked like me, went to the same churches and schools, and socialized with their own kind. Dangerous because whites had all the power and control and therefore made all the rules and decisions governing us.

Black adults, as well as children, had to learn the rules from a very early age in order to survive in this system. It generally was difficult to do because the rules would change to meet the needs of those in power. This was my first understanding of how resilient my community could be. Today, the same is true for us who continue struggling to survive: We must be resilient.

It saddens me to see that our young people sometimes feel the same oppression I felt at such a young age. For example, the first day of school was a very exciting time for me.

I can remember my mother going to school with me on the first day. I couldn't understand all of the instructions she was giving me about what route to take, what houses to avoid and how I was never to walk through certain parts of town unless I was with a group from my neighborhood.

I look at the climate in many communities now and recognize that African-American mothers still are giving their young some of the same instructions I was given at the age of six. I can still remember the fear of being chased by white children who went to an all-white school that was closer to my home than my own school. I can also remember the white adults, with their dogs, waiting for us to try to pass them without having them unleash those animals upon us.

The dogs are no longer visible to our children, but more subtle tools are in place to chisel away at the innocence of our young. I knew that if I was threatened or in danger, I had only to run to someone who looked like me to be protected as best that person could manage in an oppressed situation.

Today, because of situations that have caused us to confront each other, there are even fewer safe places young people can seek.

These experiences could have been more traumatic if I had not been raised in a household with a very powerful woman, a grandmother who really did believe that all God's children were created in His own image and were equal. She and my mother instilled in me, at a very early age, a belief that the only difference between me and any other person



Courtesy of the Young Family
Ann Young's grandmother, Hattie Counts of Columbia, South Carolina, was instrumental in guiding Young's attitudes about respecting people of all colors.

was attitude. My grandmother would say that some people had a poor attitude toward Negroes and some did not.

"Treat and respect people the way they treat and respect you. This goes for Negroes and whites alike," she told me. Those words have helped me through my 45 years of much pain and suffering in a society that still tends to judge me and my family by the color of our skin.

I can remember learning more about my culture and heritage in my teens and early 20s, and being so proud to come from a people who have survived the atrocities of a society that chooses not to see the value and the beauty of our people and our culture. We have survived in spite of the deliberate attempt at the destruction of our heritage.

I also learned that if I encountered a problem - and it involved white people - I always had to work through a process that sometimes did not come to a logical conclusion. When that happened, I was faced with asking myself whether race was sometimes the motivating factor.

Some times it was. It did not make me feel good to be forced always to bring the element of race into many aspects of my life. I can remember, for example, when my husband first came to Rochester during the summer of 1964. This was the year of the infamous urban uprising that was reported throughout the nation.

He had decided to stay at the YMCA until he learned the demographics of the city so that he could make a decision on where he wanted to live.

Although not rich by any means, he had more than enough money to afford decent housing. We were planning to get married, and he wanted to be in place as we started our life together.

I was working downstate and I can remember the phone calls and the pain in his voice when he would tell me about his troubles. When he called to inquire about apartments, they were always available. But when he would appear in person, they were always rented.

Although we had been city dwellers, we started our married life in the suburb of

Greece as one of two black couples in an apartment complex. He was successful in obtaining that apartment because his employer intervened on his behalf.

How did I feel about this? Angry. This was an adult male, educated, with some money, and he needed a major corporation to assist him in getting adequate housing.

As I look around me now, very little has changed for the majority of African-American people. We are still faced with living in substandard neighborhoods with very few services such as banks, supermarkets and gas stations.

Back in 1964, I recognized that the only difference between the North and the South was the honesty. In the South, whites left no doubt in your mind about how they felt about you. In the North, laws existed that said "no discrimination." Yet I found and still find myself in situations where someone is always trying to tell me that I am a second-class citizen.

If I feel this way, I can understand the frustration of some of our young people who are receiving a mixed message about equality and feeling totally left out and undervalued.

Robert's perspective

From my perspective as a husband and father for almost 28 years after settling in Rochester, it has not been an easy task for us to manage to raise two children into adulthood. We were fortunate to have a son and a daughter, and this afforded us the opportunity to view the racial situation from another perspective.

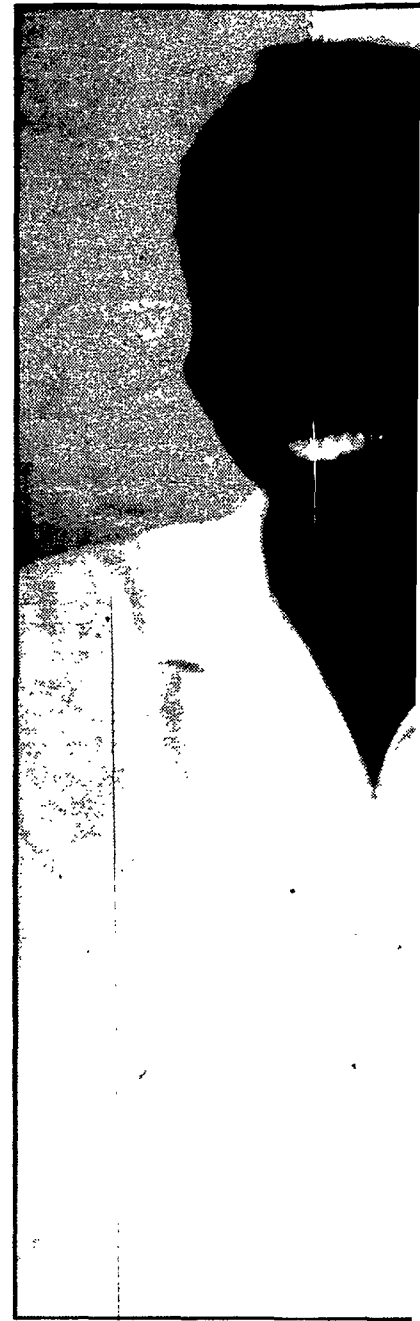
We were parents who were fortunate and unfortunate to reside in a suburban community. We were fortunate to be able to offer all the amenities and necessary financial resources to support two growing children. Parenting for us proved to be a journey unto itself.

Our children were born when Afro-Americans were trying to be assimilated into a "white society." The thinking of some people was that the more we could make our differences invisible, the faster we could be accepted in some circles - professional as well as social. This meant, of course, that we were expected to act, sound, think, dress and behave as whites. Doing so afforded a fairly high degree of tolerance which created a pseudo-comfort level for many.

On one hand, we supposedly had exposure to the best schools and communities available. We owned property and things of equal value to most people in our neighborhood. Our children began to relate to their surroundings and become shaped by the experiences they encountered. They even formed close personal friendships and acquaintances to balance the relationships formed as a result of their involvement in the African-American community.

As our children began to grow and stretch, they - like their parents before them - gradually became aware that they were really not the "in group."

Our daughter had to really work hard to be involved as a serious participant in various school and community activities. I



Robert and Ann Young have lived

remember her being told that the speaking parts available for her. She was invited and encouraged behind the scenes in a support role. She said she was once told that a career would not be realistic enough for a cast member.

This was extremely confusing and was unmistakably intelligent as she played the piano at age three. It had not been for positive reinforcement her parents, her African-American friends and children and her participation in church activities - she would severely be limited in exercising her intelligence.

To her, things always fell apart when she entered school. As a result, she was far below her capabilities. This continued until she graduated. She spent her entire high-school career she never had a "boyfriend" and an opportunity was never there.

Somehow she felt she had been outside of the circle of acceptance. One invisible standard because she looked like anyone else. She was lucky. This was not a happy time to this day, she does not have memories of her high-school experience has managed to pull it together as a way to a promising career. Some realize her dream to be a lawyer.

Our son's experience was not of our daughter, although he was perceived as having an easier time because he was an athlete. He had been the most talented, but a physical stature made him at least noticed.

Even so, he, too, suffered through the frustration of trying to understand going on. He could not get play on the basketball court, even though competing against teammates or lesser talent than his own.

He was highly frustrated because he played basketball in the city, but