

Champions of Justice: The Early History of the Human Rights Commission in Quincy

By George J. Lewis

It is perhaps one of Quincy's best-kept secrets that local individuals were not content to watch racial injustice continue during the years of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent efforts to achieve justice in the United States. These persons: black and white, young and old, Protestant, Catholic and Jew, Democratic, Republican, and Independents quietly worked together as champions of justice to successfully advance the cause of civil rights in Quincy.

Too many years have now gone by since their invaluable and often times unpopular efforts for them to be properly recognized and rewarded. Some have moved to other states and many are deceased. Perhaps it's not too late however to bestow on them the titles of Champions of Justice. It must be noted that those people mentioned here were a small portion, a tip of the iceberg, of all the people that were involved in this struggle. Here is how the Quincy Human Rights Commission started and here are a few examples of the city-changing accomplishments by these particular Champions of Justice.

Some will remember that in 1962-63, Quincy was awarded the prestigious All American City Award. The national review committee granting the awards uncovered one telling weakness in our application when they asked "What are you doing in your city to address the serious issue of civil rights?" Quincy's answer was not very positive, but apparently other contesting cities and towns had no better answers so the judges still picked Quincy as an All American City.

If Quincy was to again apply for the All American designation, it would need to show real progress in this particular area. Toward this end, the City Council under the leadership of Mayor Wes Olson, prepared and introduced an ordinance that would establish Quincy's first Commission on Human Relations. On its third reading, Alderman Ira Pierson made the motion to adopt the Ordinance, Alderman James Carlock seconded, and the Ordinance was then adopted unanimously on December 7, 1964. Soon thereafter, Mayor Olson appointed a very diverse group of nine volunteer members to the Commission: George Mason, Margaret Bright, Al Thompson, Dr. Hilliard Shair, Dr. Dan Busby, Jr., Ruth Schmiedeskamp, Rev. Ewalt Otto, Alderman Ira Pierson, and myself.

At the beginning, discussions were held to identify problem areas. To help with this, individuals in the community were invited to attend and encouraged to present information of practices of racial discrimination and ideas and proposals for corrective action. It didn't take long to identify serious problem areas: barbershops, funeral homes, newspapers, dentistry and employment.

The Commission members realized that although efforts to break down long standing discrimination practices in Quincy could be unpopular with many groups and individuals, there was a strong resolve to proceed with corrective efforts. The blacks on the Commission had lived with racial injustices all their lives but felt nothing could be done as there was little help they could expect from the white community. The whites on the Commission learned from listening to the blacks about specific injustices the blacks had endured for years. Learning the specifics in

detail moved the Commission to go to work. After all, the Commission was charged with not only receiving “reports of violations of civil rights” but to also attempt “to eradicate them.”

The Commission agreed more progress could be made by following the lead of Martin Luther King, Jr. All action was to be peaceful and without fanfare. It was this resolve that helped the Commission ultimately to succeed in many of its efforts. At the same time, this very quiet work with no publicity may have served to keep the general public from fully realizing the injustices that blacks experienced on a regular basis. For this reason, it seems fitting to describe the activities of the Commission and the results achieved so that such unfairness to blacks in this community will be less likely to be repeated in the future.

It was no secret that discrimination in employment was prevalent in Quincy. One of many examples brought to the Commission’s attention was the fact no blacks had ever been hired, except in menial positions, by Illinois Bell Telephone. Conversations with the local person in charge of telephone operations here in Quincy revealed his assertion that while a few blacks may have applied for jobs, no black person had ever passed the entry tests. He also worried that if the public learned a black was working as a telephone operator, it would be bad for business.

Members of the Commission tried to point out that since this telephone operations had been moved to a new windowless building on Broadway, the public could no longer look through windows as they could in the old building and therefore, the skin color of the workers should no longer be of concern. This reasoning seemed to at least temporarily satisfy the local manager but he continued to feel there would be no blacks in this area that could pass his tests.

After the Commission heard assurances of the black Commission members that they were aware of several very qualified black persons who had already applied and had been turned down, or ones they knew could pass the secretarial type tests, a plan was then placed into action. Black members would recruit black females in the community who would be willing to apply for a job at the telephone company and then take the tests.

Three young black women were located who reported good grades in secretarial type courses in high school, and felt confident they could pass the tests. They applied for jobs and took the tests. It wasn’t long thereafter that the telephone company manager thanked the Commission members who undertook these efforts, but almost as if to say “I told you so,” reported that all three applications were very nice and polite, but all three failed their tests and none could be hired.

Where does the Commission go from here? The black members were questioned as to their selection of the three applicants. Were they positive they each were not only qualified, but were they highly qualified? The answer was an unqualified “Yes.”

Being assured all three should have passed, and with the hope employment discrimination was not the policy of such an important state-wide utility, the President of Illinois Bell was contacted by a Commission member. When told of the results of unsuccessful efforts to obtain black employment in the Quincy Office, he seemed very disappointed and wanted us to know Illinois Bell no longer permitted discrimination. He suggested we arrange to send all three of the young women to Springfield and he would personally over-see their testing. The three had suspicions they were being set up for more disappointment but they agreed to go for the re-testing.

The result? The President reported all three not only passed but passed with flying colors. He urged all three to present themselves back to the Quincy office and they would be hired

immediately. While all of this was going on, one of the women had found a good job out-of-town but the other two went back to the Quincy Office of Illinois Bell and were hired without further delay. They both were employed for several years and one of them worked there until retirement. The local manager learned that just as he successfully raised orchids of many different colors as a hobby, he just as successfully was able to manage employees of different colors and did so until his retirement. The three young black women who had experienced rejection and were willing to try again are Champions of Justice.

Barbers and barbershops are another area the Commission studied. White members on the Commission were generally unaware of the problem about blacks being turned down for service in Quincy barbershops. The Commission determined this was a subject that deserved study. Information received by the Commission clearly showed that black males seldom patronized Quincy barbers. They had their hair cut by family members or friends in their homes and some even went to Hannibal where barbershops were more open to them. Some Commission members and others helping the Commission on various projects, interviewed several barbers and without exception, the barbers expressed the fear that if they cut the hair of blacks, they would certainly lose substantial white customers. Several barbers expressed the further excuse that they were not trained in barber school on how to cut the hair of blacks. In an effort to achieve voluntary cooperation of the barbers, it was pointed out to them that when they were licensed by the State of Illinois as barbers to cut hair, the license did not limit them to cutting white hair. This reasoning seemed to have no effect as the barbers answered that the hair of blacks was generally different from the hair of whites and they were sure blacks would not be happy with their cuts if white barbers tried to cut it.

The Commission, after considerable efforts of persuasion, concluded barbers were very reluctant to open up their shops and nothing positive was likely to happen unless some form of further action could be taken.

What could the Commission do to address this long-standing discrimination against blacks? A member then brought up the peaceful sit-in demonstrations blacks were attempting in the South. Might a "sit-in" work in a Quincy barbershop? What if black members of the Commission could enlist several black males to go all at one time and occupy all the chairs in the barbershop and sit there until they received haircuts? This sounded interesting but might have some risks. What if the barbers called the police? Might the sitters be arrested? After several meetings of the Commission, the plan was approved and the black Commission members agreed to see if they could enlist a number of black men in the community who would be willing to meet outside a barbershop on a Saturday morning and then enter the shop as waiting chairs opened up. It was decided to start with the shop in Quincy with the most barbers and that happened to be the one in what was then the Towne and Country Mall on Broadway. This shop also happened to be managed by a barber who seemed to be one of the most entrenched barbers approached. He was adamant that barbers in Quincy would never change their white-only practice.

This particular barbershop had about six barber chairs and about ten chairs for waiting customers. While it was not an easy task to find ten black men to proceed with the project, when it was reported ten such men were ready, a Saturday date was picked and the ten assembled outside the barbershop just before it opened. Perhaps it was fortunate no whites were present to go in so when the shop opened, the blacks quietly filed in and occupied all of the chairs for waiting customers.

It was reported the barbers were not only surprised with what happened, but they seemed to have no idea how to react to an event, the like of which had never happened before in Quincy's history. The barbers rather awkwardly tried to explain to the waiting men that they had no experience in cutting black hair and would they all please leave. Although fearing the police might be called, one of the blacks quietly explained he understood the barbers were licensed to cut hair -- whether it was for whites or blacks. He added that the group planned to stay all morning if necessary in order to get haircuts. The barbers finally realized they would have no business that morning if they didn't work on the black customers. This event not only ended the discriminating practice in this shop, the other barbers agreed among each other that they would take blacks from then on. The ten black men who agreed to and participated in perhaps the first sit-in in Quincy, and doing so even in fear of police being called in, are well deserving of the designation as Champions of Justice.

Another area needing attention according to information provided the Commission was that of funeral homes. Blacks reported only one of the several funeral homes in Quincy would accept blacks for funerals. So what could the Commission do to help make changes with these historic funeral home practices? It was rather tongue-in-cheek suggested perhaps rather than a "sit-in-the-chair" we might arrange for some kind of a "lay-in-box" activity. In a more serious discussion, the Commission decided to first try the art of persuasion. The funeral directors were contacted. Their first responses were similar to responses by other business groups, "If whites see our funeral home catering to black burials, we'll lose the white burials." When the funeral directors realized the Commission would not accept this reasoning, they apparently had discussions among themselves and reported they each agreed with each other to end the discriminatory practice. No further action by the Commission was needed.

The Commission learned many blacks felt unwelcome in Quincy's dental offices and many in the black community went to Hannibal for their dental work. Dr. Donald Busbey, Jr., a Commission member and a dentist, agreed dentists were no different than other businesses and blacks were not welcomed in any, if not all, the dental chairs of Quincy. He volunteered to discuss the problems with the dentists, perhaps at a dental meeting. The dentists were immediately cooperative as they reached general agreement with each other to end the white only practice and to welcome blacks. Dr. Busbey, Jr. is more than deserving of being named posthumously as a QUINCY Champion of Justice.

The Commission received information from the black community that the local newspaper seemed to have the belief, or at least the practice, that white marriages and funerals for whites were more important than those for blacks. Blacks reported marriage and funeral coverage for blacks seldom if ever appeared in newspapers. Blacks told of the pride black couples and their families and friends had for their marriages. Unlike white marriages where pictures of the couples and descriptions were prominently printed in the newspapers, blacks didn't enjoy the descriptions and photos of their weddings in print. Perhaps because of the work of the Commission, the newspaper published what is believed to be the first picture of a black bride, Mrs. Arthur Stanley Jones, and an article covering all of the associated wedding activities. See the July 19, 1965 issue of the *Quincy Herald Whig*.

An important part of the application for the second All American City award involved progress in the area of race relations. The work of the Commission with the results referred to above combined with twenty years of further positive developments in many other areas of life in Quincy culminated in the Judges once again singling out Quincy for the 1984-85 All American City Award.

In addition to those proposed above as being deserving of the designation of QUINCY Champion of Justice, the following should also be so designated:

- Mayor Wes Olson for his leadership in presenting the Ordinance to establish Quincy's Commission on Human Relations.
- Alderman and Attorney Ira Pierson and Alderman James Carlock for steering the Ordinance through to successful adoption by the City Council.
- George Mason and Margaret Bright for their invaluable contributions to the work and functions of this Commission.
- Al Thompson and his brother, Dick Thompson, who gained and deserved the complete confidence of the black community and were highly successful in enlisting others in helping with Commission projects.
- Dr. Hilliard Shair and Rev. Ewalt Otto who provided considerable and invaluable wisdom and advice to members of the Commission.
- Ruth Schmiedeskamp who was relentless in keeping the work of the Commission on track and moving forward.
- Countless others who effectively assisted the Commission with its work and those who voluntarily ceased discriminatory practices in response to Commission activities.

As some members moved away from Quincy and others passed away, the Commission members were not replaced and the Commission became inactive by the middle 1970's. While some major changes had been made in race relations by the work of the Commission, race relations in any city deserves on-going attention. With such realization, concerned citizens and city officials worked together and brought about the reactivation of the commission, now known as the Quincy Human Rights Commission in May 2000. Its stated mission is to provide leadership and advocacy to secure, protect and promote human rights for all people.

As a result of their and other efforts, there will no doubt be further improvements in race relations in this area. There continues to be a need for new Champions of Justice in Quincy. Our thanks go to all the other individuals and organizations that have also been a part of the progress made thus far in the area of justice and equality, the many other champions that are not acknowledged here.

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