

Paul Redd: Experiences with Racism

(Originally edited by Andrew Lutsky and edited for the classroom by Cari Ladd. The longer interview is available at: http://www.pbs.org/pov/disturbingtheuniverse/interview_redd.php)

My name is Paul Redd, and my family won a case of discrimination in housing which permitted us to move into Rye Colony, December 1962.

Initially we saw the apartment in the newspaper here in Rye, and my wife called, and they told her they had, uh, this lovely apartment, so we made an appointment to come over. But being not so ... slow, we had a white lady come. Lotte Kunstler, Bill Kunstler's wife, and two other ladies-- I think Dorothy Sterling was one of them—went to the rental office to identify the fact that there were apartments available. My wife Oriole and I were parked at the Rye railroad station. After they had identified that there was an apartment available, they came out to the rental office and there was a lady sitting in the parking lot. They gave her the signal to come to get us. The lady came out and gave us a signal, we drove over to the manager's office and asked for an apartment. And he said he had just rented the apartment to those ladies. They said, "Well, we know the Redds need it more than we do and we would be glad to relinquish it to them." He refused to give it to us. We then had witnesses that he refused to give it to us. We then filed charges with the State Division of Human Rights.

It was in the newspaper a lot, and on the radio, and so people were interested. And we'd get calls from people who wanted to know, What did we want to move into some place that nobody wanted us? We had people who called and said, uh, "I know where you can find an apartment in Scarsdale, New Rochelle, a house." And we said that is not the issue. The issue is that Oriole's family had been here since 1879, and Oriole and I had a right to live in Rye if that's where we wanted to live and we could afford to do so. And, uh, some of them just simply did not like it.

Every night they used to call for something. They wanna know, uh, "Why you <racial slur> wanna live in a, in an all-white neighborhood? What do you ... they don't want you there. What are you doing there?" Um, "Go to Harlem, or go wherever." And, um, they just use all kinda words. Uh, Oriole got most of those because I'd be out working or someplace.

Well, we got it from people all over, you know, uh, even from black people who didn't understand why we were applying and were putting up the fight. Because they, just like some whites, believed that if people don't want you someplace, why should you go there? They felt like we were creating a situation of moving in someplace that, uh, we weren't wanted, and, and really had no right to be there. But we believed that we had a right to be here, as American citizens. And when we are standing in the middle of that, that is, uh ... very ... a thing that really, uh, makes you feel bad, because you really wonder, Am I doing the right thing or am I not doing the right thing?

For example, some people said, "Why do you put your kids through this?" See, mind you, during that time, I think my daughter was like nine years old and my son was like four or four and a half. And they said, "I understand what you're doing, but I wouldn't put my kids through that kind of thing." And we thought about that, too, but we felt like we had to do what we had to do. And our kids caught, um, hell sometimes right here. There were a couple of kids that would play with 'em, and then some wouldn't. So they really had ... I would say they probably caught it worse than we did because the adults, they either would speak to you or not speak to you and just keep on going, you know. But the kids, they're the ones that had to ... Oriole used to take the kids out someplace else to play. You know.

My kids went through school in Rye, and I've learned later, since they're grown, a lot of things that they went through that I just did not know at the time. For example, my son and a white boy were in line, and they did like kids do, push each other. Uh, they took my son to the principal's office and jumped all over him and just left the white kid alone. And that's just one incident. There were a lot of things that went on that I learned later, uh, through my kids, who didn't complain then about it.

Uh, my daughter came home and told us a story about, she was out at the playground playing, and said the, uh, she was sliding down the sliding board and the kids were throwing rocks at her, telling her to get out of the park. So her mother asked her, "What'd you do, Paula?" She says, "I told 'em I had a right to be there as much as they did," and she said, "I just ducked 'em and kept on slidin.'" And we thought that was great for a nine-year-old.

Did you have a sense when you were fighting for this house that this was something that was not only for you but for other people as well?

We had hoped so. We had hoped that our fight for, uh, the right for a person to live where they could afford to live, uh, that this would do it. It didn't do anything. Because we've been here since December 1962 ... they're still no blacks in this complex of 156 units. I'm still mad as hell. I'm just trying to be calm right now, but I'm mad as hell about how the change is. If you'd ever read my columns in my newspaper you'd find out that I am still mad as hell. Um, I remember some lady was telling me about ... it takes time. I said, "You want me to wait for something that you've been enjoying all your life." Um, my mother-in-law died at ninety-nine, and she was discriminated all her life, and it looks like I'm going to die before blacks ever achieve total freedom and equality. So, am I discouraged? I am very angry about the way America treats blacks.

What do you say to people who think that equal rights have been achieved already, that the civil rights movement was victorious and that, you know, that we've made it?

Well, some people probably do think they've made it because they have the money and, uh, they're just doing their own things. Some blacks are doing alright, but some blacks have always done alright. But if you just look out here and see, every day you can see people who are being discriminated against for one reason or another. There's still blacks out there ... blacks still compile the largest, uh, number of people who have been out of a job. And why is that? Everybody else who come here, illegals, they're here, they can get jobs. They talk about, uh, jobs that Americans won't take, and you go into diners in this county ... How many blacks have you ever seen being a waiter or waitress in a diner or in the fine restaurants in New York City? So those are jobs we never had in the first place. So don't tell me I don't want those jobs, I've never had the opportunity to have those jobs. And that really makes me angry.

It's not just blacks that are being discriminated. It's, uh, the poor are still being discriminated against, the immigrants are being discriminated against, a whole host of people being discriminated against. And those people who think that the ... that we have made it are fools. Because all they have to do is just one time to go to the wrong place.

That's happened to me now, you can still see it right here in Rye. I go to the diner, the White Plains diner, not too long ago, sat down at the counter, and the waitress was in the back. And a white guy came up and sat at the counter ... I knew I had a problem. The minute he sat down, I knew I had a problem. And she came out of the back, she went right to the white man. I said,

Why didn't you ask who was first? The woman looked at me like I was crazy. I became the person who was causing trouble because I asked her why didn't she ask who was next. If there're two white people standing there and they go to one, and the other one says, "Oh, I was here first," they say, "Oh, I'm sorry," and they go to that one. But when I say I was there first, then they look at you like, So what? So she came over and took my order, then went over and took the white person's order. And guess whose order came out first? Two hamburgers ... whose order came out first? The white guy's came out first. And so they get you one way or the other. Don't that make you mad? You better believe that makes you awful mad. Ain't nothing you can do about it ... but create a situation. They call the police on you, the police beat you up because they say you were creating a disturbance, so you lost all the way around. And it keeps happening and happening. That's black rage.

A lot of people do not understand that, that sometimes, sometimes it tips a wire which makes you act, to everybody outside, like you're crazy. You're not crazy. It means that you had enough. Fanny Lou Hamer coined the phrase, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Do you think it's important that people remember what happened here?

Oh, yes, I think it's important that people know what happened. Sometimes I wonder, you know, that people don't want to hear about this, but I think it's important. It doesn't seem to have helped this place, uh, integrate, but I think it's important for people to know some of the things that we've gone through, so hopefully they won't have to repeat some of it. Hopefully if another black tried to apply for an apartment here they will remember the fight that they had to try to keep people out and that since we've been here we didn't burn the place down. And, uh, ... that we want the same thing that any other person wants, and that is a safe place to raise our family.