

Coming of Age

How a product of the segregated South became an advocate for change. By JOHN SERGENT, BA'63, MD'66

In the late fall of 1961, I was a member of the Vanderbilt Student Senate, and presented a resolution proposing that the Student Senate recommend to the University's Board of Trust that Vanderbilt should accept "qualified Negro applicants" into the University. Vanderbilt, like almost every other school in the South, was not integrated except in the Divinity School and one or two other graduate programs.

This was a period of fairly extreme student apathy, in which the usual Student Senate debate would relate to something like one-way streets behind some of the sorority houses. However, after the resolution was presented, there was a sudden change in the mood of the campus. Lamar Alexander, then the editor of *The Hustler*, supported the resolution, as did Roy Blount, Jr., now a nationally known humorist and writer.

Before going further into a discussion of the events that followed the submission of that resolution to the Student Senate, a little background is in order. I attended Frankfort High School in Frankfort, Kentucky, and we desegregated in the fall of 1956, my sophomore year. Although Frankfort was never a hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity, we did have an event that made us all aware of the fact that desegregation was not going to be painless. Our first football game that year was the Friday night before the school year actually started, and there was a lot of

interest in the fact that we had several black football players, including two on the starting team, a halfback and a fullback.

The football field in Frankfort is located on the banks of the Kentucky River, and there is a hill right behind the field. When we went out for the pre-game warm-up it was still daylight, and nothing unusual happened. We then went back into the fieldhouse for the pre-game pep talk, and when we came back out it was dark and the lights were on. As we ran onto the field we all saw a large cross burning on the hill behind the stands. A total of three crosses were burned during that game, with one always in flames.

On the field, however, we didn't pay much attention to the crosses. Kermit Williams, the



black starting halfback, weighed about 150 pounds and was fast as lightning. Kermit scored two of our three touchdowns to bring Frankfort a 21-20 victory. There is a picture of all of the team carrying Ker-

mit off the field on our shoulders, with a cross burning in the background. It was published in a national magazine, *Life*, as I recall.

We had some minor incidents in high school, but essentially the next three years were uneventful as far as race relations were concerned. Those were the years of Sputnik and fallout shelters and the "crisis" in American education that had allowed the Russians to get ahead.

We did read about problems in school desegregation in other parts of the country, but in Frankfort we seemed to get along just fine.

I had always planned on becoming a doctor, and when I received a scholarship to Vanderbilt my college selection process was over. In 1959-60, my freshman year, the Lawson story erupted, but I had issues of my own to deal with. I had just joined a fraternity and was involved in a couple of extra-curricular activities. All in all I was as happy as I had ever been. I saw the pickets around Kirkland Hall, and I read about the turmoil in the Divinity School along with the Department of Medicine and various other departments in the University, but managed mostly to put it out of my mind. Even in late-night bull sessions in the dorm, when the topic would come up I would usually be sympathetic but didn't really want to talk about it. Mostly, I wanted the issue to go away so that I could get back to having a great time in college.

However, it didn't go away. Around the South schools were being desegregated by court order, often violently, and a few colleges had voluntarily opened their doors to black students. Nashville had become the center for national training for students in sit-in demonstrations as well as what would become the Freedom Rides. Nashville's two newspapers, *The Tennessean* and the now defunct *Banner*, took polar-opposite positions, with *The Tennessean* proposing racial conciliation and integration and the *Banner* staunchly opposing it. Complicating this was the fact that the publisher of the *Banner*, James Stahlman, was a very prominent and generous member of the

Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

All of this meant that integration had gradually gone from one of a number of topics to just about the only topic whenever political discussions occurred. I found myself increasingly a focus of interest and sometimes antagonism, primarily because I had attended an integrated school and told my friends that it was no big deal.

I was also a member of the Vanderbilt debate team and had the opportunity to travel to a number of other institutions and meet with students from all over the country. It was increasingly apparent that the segregated schools of the South simply were at a huge disadvantage when trying to present themselves as important national institutions. Then of course there is the moral issue. While the opponents of desegregation often talked about the Southern way of life, the potential loss of alumni contributions, and so forth, it was clear that there was absolutely no moral justification for Vanderbilt continuing to be a segregated school.

I remember when I made the decision to present the resolution to the Student Senate. My girlfriend (who has now been my wife for 38 years), and I had been studying in the library one night, and we went over to the long-since-closed Flaming Steer on West End Avenue for a snack. Without warning, over a cheeseburger and french fries, I told her what I was going to do. I think I just wanted to be sure that at least one friend would stick by me. Needless to say, she did.

The weeks before the vote in the Student Senate were a time of intense politicking. I had a sheet that I was keeping on the probable votes, and it was obvious that it was going to be extremely close. After a prolonged debate in an overheated room in Alumni Hall, it finally came to a vote. We lost by one vote, with two friends I had counted on going against the resolution, primarily because their

constituents had opposed it. I immediately proposed that we have a student body-wide referendum, and the Senate supported this unanimously. A date was set for a week later.

During the next several days I met with any group that would sit still for a while, try-

ing to persuade people to vote for the referendum. These included fraternity and sorority houses, dorm meetings, and lots of table talk in the Commodore Room. The highlight of that period was a debate in Alumni Hall in which Roy Blount and I represented the pro-integration side. Neely Auditorium was packed and included a few professors from Fisk University and Tennessee State University. After the debate some of the professors came up and shook hands with Roy and me, and I remember Roy saying afterwards that was the first time in his life that he had shaken hands with a black person. I thought for a second, and realized that except for the kind of hand slaps that occur on the football field, the same

was true for me. The referendum was also defeated, primarily because of a huge negative vote in the School of Engineering. It passed in the College of Arts and Sciences.

A few years ago Bev Asbury, then the University Chaplain, started the Martin Luther King Lectureship Series and invited Lamar, Roy and me to participate along with Jim Lawson. As I thought about the remarks that I would make that day, I looked back on the naiveté of those years. I said something to the effect that we honestly believed that we were trying to decide whether or not Vanderbilt was to become an integrated institution. I used the analogy of standing on a beach when a tidal wave is coming and debating whether or not we were going to let it hit us. In retrospect, of course, the question was not whether Vanderbilt would become an integrated institution, but how.

Again, with the advantage of hindsight, I think we did reasonably well. I would give us about a B- or C+. The handling of the Lawson affair was clearly Harvie Branscomb's biggest regret in an otherwise great career as Chancellor, and I had the opportunity to talk to him about it several times late in his life. However, the

actual decision to desegregate the school produced surprisingly little turmoil, and was decided at the very next meeting of the Board of Trust after the student body referendum was defeated. Given the composition of the University's board at that time, it is probably unlikely that they would have voted to desegregate as soon as they did if they had felt that the students were pressuring them into it, so maybe as things worked out it's just as well that we lost.

From my vantage point today, I can't understand it when people say no progress has been made in race relations. Granted we still have a long way to go, and many parts of our inner

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