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The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

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HILLCREST

While I grew up in a time when racism and discrimination were rampant in the nation, in my own sheltered little world, nothing could have been better. If you haven't already, you'll eventually learn that the key to a successful marriage is two simple words, "Yes, dear." Linda and I have been together for years because of those two words, among a number of other things, of course.

It took each of us a previous marriage and a few kids to find our way back to each other, though we'd known each other for years. My wife and I lived in the same neighborhood when we were younger. In fact, I had to walk past her house when I wanted to go anywhere. We were very different though. She was into music and



reading. I was into sports. She was introverted. I was extroverted. We never really had a strong friendship in those days because our interests differed so much, but I've grown to adore these differences. After reuniting after many years apart, we fell in love and married. She teaches me something new every day—it's amazing.

Our school was built in 1923, and it was huge—one of the biggest in the nation, in fact. I'm not quite sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing, but almost everyone in that school knew me. I was the popular kid—the kid who could be friends with almost anyone. I realized at a very young age that I had a gift, although at the time I wasn't sure if it was a gift or a curse. Many people came to me with their problems, seeking some kind of advice. I turned my extroverted personality and skill for listening into a career. Now I work as a social worker and youth worker, and I absolutely love every minute of it.

My dad died when I was very young, and I was raised as a single child in my home. My other siblings had all grown up by the time I was born, and they had all left the house and begun their own lives. Because I had no brothers and sisters to entertain and annoy, and no siblings to entertain and annoy me, I had to find other ways to occupy my time. I was an athlete and I played ping pong, basketball, baseball and swam

all summer long. I ran around the neighborhood making friends, playing sports, and maybe making a bit of trouble. I spent most of my time at the YMCA, where my life was shaped. I became a social worker working with kids later in life, in part, because of the men who poured into my life at the YMCA. Because I was an only child, it helped me become popular with the other kids. They would come to my house because they were welcomed, I had a lot of toys, and we had a big backyard. We played ball and croquet there. I loved the freedom of the summer, but I was always ready to start back to school again. Times were very different then; no one ever skipped school. If a child was seen walking the streets during school hours, they would most certainly be stopped and asked why they were not in class. But we loved school; it was a chance for us to see all of our friends; it gave us something to do.

I lived in a time when everyone knew their neighbors. I knew the names of every person on our street. People owned their houses, and divorce was almost unheard of. The neighborhood was mostly black. At the same time, I had never heard of racism. All I knew was my neighborhood and my school. **I GUESS YOU COULD SAY WE WERE SHELTERED—SHELTERED FROM THE INJUSTICE THAT EXISTED THROUGHOUT THE NATION. IGNORANCE REALLY IS BLISS, AT LEAST DURING**

CHILDHOOD. Life was good to us. We laughed. We joked. We played. We lived.

In about seventh grade, public housing started happening, and this was the first time we started getting exposed to other people who were not homeowners and who appeared to have different values and priorities.

Our parents did not expose us to the discrimination that they suffered. We grew up not knowing much about segregation and prejudice except what we saw on T.V. Our parents shielded us from this. I remember taking trips to Kentucky to visit our relatives and not making a single stop along the way. **WE SIMPLY PACKED THE FOOD WE WOULD EAT ON THE DRIVE THERE. I DIDN'T THINK WAS ANYTHING OF IT, UNTIL LATER IN LIFE WHEN I REALIZED THE EXTENT OF SEGREGATION. WE BROUGHT OUR FOOD WITH US BECAUSE WE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN WELCOMED IN RESTAURANTS IN THE SOUTH.**

My wife is partly white, as am I and almost every African-American that I know of. My grandmother was fathered by a white doctor at the farm where her parents share cropped. The problem was that, back then, in Alabama, where my family came from, a white man could not be charged with rape of a black woman. It was just not acknowledged as rape. Yet I was not raised with any anger towards that. We were raised to not speak out to authority, whether it be our

parents, teachers, or law enforcers. We simply accepted the life we had and never questioned what it would be like if it were different or how to go about making that change.

Now, I live in a time when every day, a man who looks like me will be killed by another man who looks like me. Unjustified violence is something that is part of today's life. It is something that pains me, and, sadly, it doesn't have to be like this. While there has certainly been some improvement, as a country, we still have a long way to go. It is a sad truth that every black parent will teach his or her male child from the age of seven on up, to immediately put his hands up when a policeman speaks to him and do exactly as he is told. That is my reality. That is the reality of my children and my grandchildren. And if we don't start making changes soon, it will be the unfortunate reality of generations to come.