

LIFESTYLE

**VOICES // REFLECTIONS ON RACISM Series: SHADES OF DIFFERENCE**

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One in an ongoing series exploring the impact of race on our lives.

Today, like every weekday, old folks will gather at the Salina Senior Activity Center in East Austin to eat lunch and play dominos or just chew the fat. Most are black, and many have lived in this part of town all their lives. In the old days, they had to live here. Austin, like practically every other city in the country, was segregated.

Now, following the verdict in the case of the officers accused of beating Rodney King, the issues of black and white have erupted anew across the nation. It's a different era, but some of the questions sound sadly familiar. What can be done, people are asking, to bridge the chasm between races?

Elderly blacks ponder the question from a singular vantage point. They've lived through it all: segregation and integration, the Great Depression and the Great Society.

Here we speak to two Salina Center regulars: Johnny Houston, 77, a retired airplane engineer who had the first radio repair shop in East Austin, and Onie B. Conley, (who never gives her age), an active community worker and a retired school teacher with a master's degree from Columbia University who spent 43 years in the classroom.

Both grew up in Austin, and both have watched blacks challenge discrimination. Conley remembers Huston-Tillotson students sitting at drugstore lunch counters before being "dragged off like a sack of flour." Houston himself once refused to surrender his seat on a bus to two white men.

Here, condensed from three hours of conversation, they talk about their lives - from their introduction to racism as children to their feelings about the beating case in L.A. to their hopes for today's black youth.

They don't always agree. One thing they do concur on: More government spending is not the only answer to problems facing the black community.

Conley: We were coming from school, and the white kids would call us derogatory names. And when they did, my brother would get hackberry switches and switch their legs. And they (the white kids) would get up on the high top of the hill, and when they got out of reach, they'd still say it. They'd laugh. That's when I first learned there was a conflict between the races. I didn't understand it. . .

But my grandma taught me this: "That person's mouth is no prayer book. Because they call you a dog, you're not a dog. They have the problem."

Houston: We were in a (five and dime store), and I wanted a drink of water. I went to the fountain. My mother snatched me back and said 'Johnny, you can't drink out of that.' I said, 'Why?' I couldn't understand. . . When I

grew up and found out I was treated different from whites, I was bitter. I said, "Why? We're Americans." Democracy was supposed to mean we're all free and equal. I used to not like white people much. And I was a little bitter. But as I grew and got older and joined church, then I changed. I'm not bitter toward anyone now, but I was real bitter way back then.

Conley: Not me. I said, 'They're not going to hold me down. I'm going to go on and do what I can do for my own race. And do the best I can.' I went to school. Knocked on doors. Got me a job. I always kept myself clean. One woman told me when I went to get a job, 'Here's a little woman out here who smells like a tub of suds.' I washed dishes and cleaned up. And when I was there, some of the young sons would (harass me) . . . but I didn't pay any more attention to them than this wall. I put a circle around myself because I wanted to get somewhere.

Houston: The white section lived in better houses, and had better streets. They had potholes, but we had dirt. But it seemed to me most of us (blacks and whites) were poor. So we all got along. . . (But) sometimes a whole bunch of white girls and boys would come over to the neighborhood, riding in an old Ford or something. And they would be going 'nigger-hunting.' They would drive by and hit me with a rotten tomato or rotten peach or something. What are you gonna do? If I had caught one of them and hit one of them with a rock, they'd have thrown me in jail.

Conley: They never did bother me.

Houston: Black women had an easier time than we did.

Conley: I went to an African-American school called Samuel Houston. It was a religious institution fostered by the AME Methodist church. I played basketball, played tennis and represented the school in interscholastic debating and all that. And I worked - three or four different places. I didn't pay any attention to the Caucasians. I didn't even know they were living, except to give me a job.

Houston: I knew they were living. All down through the years, I knew that white was white and I was black, and there was a difference . . . I left high school in the 11th grade and when the war came, I went into the Army. I went back to school on a GI Bill, and I went four years in mechanical training. It was a black college: Crescent Institute of Technology.

Conley: Racism is always going to exist. People are taught it. Through the family. . . (But) prejudice is everywhere. Sometimes it's brother against sister. Or if a Jew marries a Presbyterian, the family may not want that. . . But when adults pick on other people, it isn't a problem of race. It's a problem of themselves. We have problems, and we project these things. It raises our estimation of ourselves if we can pick on people we think are inferior.

Houston: We've always had pretty fair race relations in Austin, as far back as I can remember. I never had any problem with the law. I'm not saying that the law always treats you exactly like they should. But if the police stop me, I act nice toward him and answer his questions. I've never been hit, cursed, brutalized in any kind of way. Myself. I'm just one person. I think the way you talk to a person matters. It's the way you carry yourself. My mother told me, when I was real small, if I wanted to survive, there were two things: 'Don't lie and don't steal.' If you get the reputation of being a liar, black or white, nobody will respect you...

Conley: (Racism) does exist. But it isn't pronounced as far as I see it - I mean, a whole lot of it.

Houston: It's not as bad as it used to be. Sometimes, I can walk into a store and they treat me different from a white person. They may wait on them first or be more courteous to them. Or make me wait. Most of them won't. But some of them might.

Conley: Sometimes, I catch people like that. People. A few. Some few are like that. Some are taught that way. Their parents talk about (blacks) at the dinner table...The first thing to do (to bridge the races) is to get an education. I don't care what kind of trade you're in. . . I think African Americans need an education more than

Caucasians do. Most of the Caucasians have money. If not, their relatives have it. The young men (my Caucasian students) used to say: "My uncle's got me a job, and I'm going to get such and such money." But you see, our people don't have that stuff. .

Houston: If we start off in a race, and you get 1,000 miles ahead of me, and we both keep up the same speed, I'll never catch up. We were slaves. Then integration came, and there was the Jim Crow law. And we were segregated another 100 years. Blacks will never catch up with the mainstream of life. Maybe a few. . . But those who are determined to stay in school, they'll make it. Like she says, you have to be determined. You have to be double-determined to make it.

Conley: You've got to know what's going on in this world - politically and every other kind of way. And education teaches you how to find out about this stuff. And how to get a job. And what to say and what not to say. . . I've always put an emphasis on individuals. I don't put my problems on race or on the government.

Houston: I feel that young blacks don't have an incentive. Used to be, educated blacks didn't fool with uneducated blacks too much. They thought they were better. But blacks need role models. So the young people take these guys that play football and basketball and sports as role models. Sports is the only way they see out.

Conley: Your mama and daddy are your role models. . . (But) mama's working. . . Most kids (both black and white) are by themselves in the evenings. . . Our mothers had to work for the Caucasians and leave their families alone. My mama didn't have much time to fool with us. That's why I give my grandma credit. When the grandmas were there, there weren't latchkey kids. Kids had a better chance. They had somebody to meet them at the door and recognize they were human beings. If it hadn't been for my grandma, I'd have been in the devil's den, sure.

Houston: I think 30 years from now, it will be much much better. Than it ever was. Practically everybody is in the same boat now. We've got to get together. That brotherly love that the Bible talks about, and sisterly love. We have to start right now. We're going to have to do it. The government isn't going to.

Conley: We're all connected. Everybody's connected. Regardless of color or creed. And I am responsible for my actions. . . (As for King), he was responsible for the situation. . . He was racing, according to the paper. It didn't justify (the beating). I'm not saying that. They overstepped their bounds. . . But if (King) hadn't done that, they wouldn't have been after him. . . I don't say all situations are like that. Sometimes they're picked on because of color.

Houston: Let me ask you a question: Do you think they would have beat a white man like that for the same problem?

Conley: That isn't the point. . . I look after me. If I leave my door open, I did it, if a man comes in and gets me. Now if he broke in, that's a horse of another color. . . I depend on me. What can I do to straighten myself out? I get my education and let (whites) know they're dealing with a human being. . . When you've got your education, you've got an edge, mister. I don't care who you are.

Houston: I think this generation needs all the help everyone can give them. Young people can be what they want to be. They have to be determined. If they go to church, success will come quicker, instead of if they're playing on the streets. Everybody's got a chance, but they just have to work at it. The Lord gave everybody a talent, but they have to use their talents.

Conley: Most of the people I taught don't think they can get anywhere with a lack of money. They want to do it now, right now. It takes time. . . Start down here (at the family level) by teaching them: French. Spanish. Records. Start down here and give them something they can depend on. Right now. Give them music. They can use that church's organ or the piano if they don't have one. . . (To finance an education), you can get jobs at McDonald's and places I couldn't go to. And you don't have to wash dishes all your life. (Young people) think it's degrading. . . Work is not degrading. No ma'am.

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