

The Integration of Oak Ridge: A unique perspective, part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 20, 2021)

Rachael Colby is the daughter-in-law of Rev. Roy D. Colby Sr., who became co-minister of United Church, Chapel on the Hill in 1962, and who, along with Dr. James E. Spicer, worked to desegregate Oak Ridge during the mid 1960's. Rachael has immersed herself in our history of that era and by doing so has brought to light details that otherwise might be lost to history and forgotten. She has conducted several interviews and seeks to do even more.

This second part in the Historically Speaking series Rachael has agreed to write focuses on efforts including picketing, interactions by the Human Relations Advisory Board headed by Dr. Spicer, and specifically the desegregation of a laundromat. *An Oak Ridge Story*, written by Dr. Spicer, continues to be a major reference point.

Some of the things that happened in the 1960's integration efforts are hard to read today. Please keep in mind the times and know we need to understand the impact on those living the experiences and who recall their feelings in the interviews with Rachael.

Come back to the 60's for a while with Rachael's unique outside perspective on Oak Ridge:

The young Black man stood against the backdrop of Trinity United Methodist Church on Robertsville Road in the late afternoon. Jefferson Avenue stretched across the way. The picketers had gathered again outside the Multi-Matic Laundry at the end of the West Mall and Market Area in Jefferson Center. Their goal: integrate the Laundromat. Most of the picketers were White but some of the young man's neighbors participated. Sometimes he'd stop and watch the picketers on his way home from work in Oak Ridge to his wife and small children in Scarboro, the area designated for Black citizens when the city was built.

Created in 1942 as one of the sites of the U.S. government's Manhattan Project, Oak Ridge played a vital role and by developing the materials to build the atomic bomb that ended WWII. However, two decades after its inception, racial segregation practices established by Jim Crow laws still held their evil grip in Oak Ridge. Some businesses and public facilities in Oak Ridge offered Black people restricted access, while others prohibited their use.

Some Oak Ridge residents said they were unaware of the needs, the disparity in treatment and access to public facilities for Black citizens in the 60s. Blacks were paid much lower wages for the same jobs as White people then. Most Blacks with college degrees were denied jobs that matched their education and only offered lower paying positions in Oak Ridge, another Scarboro resident shared.

"It was just the way it was," one woman said, speaking of her life as a young mom in Oak Ridge in the early to mid-1960s.

"I was only a teenager," her daughter said. "It was just the way it was. I wasn't aware until I saw the picketers."

"It was just the way it was," said the then young black man who wishes to remain anonymous. "I was in survival mode... trying to take care of my family."

It was way past high time for change.

Fran Silver, a first generation American and a member of the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge, was aware. She picketed for integration. I asked her what made her aware of the struggles, the plight of her Black brothers and sisters.

"My whole life was spent around the Scarboro daycare," Mrs. Silver said. "It became a passion of mine. Margaret Phillips, the woman who ran it was outstanding. I learned more from her as a Black person than probably anyone else."

"By and large the protests to implement integration were driven by the White Oak Ridge community members who were eager to get injustices of Oak Ridge cleared off. And we were persistent," Mrs. Silver said.

"It takes a strong man to walk away from a potential trouble situation," the then young Black man said. "Some of my friends from Scarboro picketed the laundromat and were spat on. You have to know yourself, what you can bear... That wasn't me... And I didn't want to jeopardize the movement."

"It was much easier for White people to help than for the Black people to get involved [with the picketing] because we were economically secure. They couldn't do anything to us except call us pests." Fran Silver shared. "There was less risk for us than for the Black citizens of Scarboro. But George Walker [a Black teacher at the Scarboro school] was one who got involved."

In the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy ordered Oak Ridge, Tennessee, rid of Jim Crow law practices and integrated immediately, but quietly. David L. Lawrence, former governor of Pennsylvania and JFK's Chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Opportunities in Housing, delivered the message.

In response, Mayor Robert (Bob) McNees formed the Human Relations Advisory Board. In June 1963, Mayor McNees called a meeting with Dr. James Spicer, pastor of Chapel on the Hill, and told him of the newly formed committee comprised of prominent citizens from Scarboro and Oak Ridge, all like-minded in the goal of integrating Oak Ridge and willing to tackle the task. Dr. Spicer recalled his surprise when he discovered they had not only appointed him to the committee, but also elected him as their first chairman.

When the committee formed, they and fifteen Scarboro citizens addressed and succeeded in integrating the Davis Brothers Cafeteria. This led to the integration of other restaurants in Oak Ridge and throughout the South.

The Oak Ridge branch of the group Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) helped train picketers in nonviolent protest and organized marches for integration. Weeks-long pickets finally persuaded the resistant Snow White Diner in Oak Ridge to follow suit.

Mrs. Silver recalled the demonstration at the Multi-Matic laundromat that her husband Earnest (lay president of the Jewish Congregation) and the Reverend William G. Pollard of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church led. While the integrationists picketed, white supremacist Ku Klux Klan members picketed around them.

"Have you ever had the experience of a Klan going around you?" Mrs. Silver said. "White hoods and all. Pretty scary stuff... There's not any distance between you and the Klan. One of the Klan members, a neighbor of ours, threatened to burn a cross in our front yard. It didn't particularly disturb us, but it frightened my three-year-old daughter."

"Reverend Pollard was a great friend," Mrs. Silver said. "a man of great respect, having a clergy collar and being the founder of the Oak Ridge Associated Universities. He used his voice in just the right way—loud! He made a speech like an old prophet."

The committee turned their attention to the laundromat when members of the Scarboro community began using it and encountered rebuffs and scuffles. Picketers continued to encounter the same.

The group of eight CORE members, comprised of both Black and White women, showed up on Saturday July 29th, 1963, and began washing their clothes at the Multi-Matic Laundry owned by Joe E. Young and

Willie Harlan Mabrey. When they refused to leave at Young's request, he and his assistant forcibly removed them and their clothes from the laundromat.

Young then obtained a court injunction on July 29th, 1963, which prohibited picketers from entering the premises which sat on private property. When informed of the injunction and Mr. Young's declaration that he would not integrate, Mrs. Nelson Stephens, chairman of CORE, responded that they would continue to demonstrate.

"Sometimes I'd drive by and pull over and watch," said the then young Black man. "I appreciated what they were doing."

The protests of the summer of 1963 at the Multi-Matic Laundry stretched into 1964. By then, they were the only remaining segregated laundromat in Oak Ridge.

The Ku Klux Klan distributed flyers in advance to announce their Saturday May 9th, 1964, meeting "to inform the public of the communist takeover of our Government and steps we can take to prevent this menace from happening." Klan member Gilbert Meyers had requested permission to hold the meeting at Young's Multi-Matic Laundry after he encountered the picketers at the laundromat the prior year. Young granted permission and expressed his full sympathy for the KKK. The Oak Ridger newspaper reported on the event the following Monday.

As the light faded, an estimated 500 people gathered at the laundromat site, including Klan supporters, Civil Rights picketers, onlookers, local politicians, and several ministers who supported integration, twenty-nine uniformed police officers, and about 60 costumed Klan members.

CORE members and their supporters assembled on a triangle of public land at the intersection of Robertsville Road and Jefferson Avenue, as the court injunction prohibited them from the laundromat property. The Reverend Arthur Graham of Oak Ridge Unitarian Church and Reverend William G. Pollard gave speeches.

Klan members shouted about "the Red N- - - plot against South and U.S.A." and spewed hateful, erroneous political and racist statements including disparaging remarks about Black people, JFK, and MLK.

Meanwhile, picketers and others who supported civil rights marched the perimeter of the property and sang freedom songs such as "We Shall Overcome." Key Klan speaker, Raymond Anderson, "the grand dragon of the state of Tennessee" referred to the melody as "the Communist international song." City councilmen John Griess and Washington Butler, and Rev. Pollard carried signs. Mr. Griess voiced disappointment that more government officials did not attend.

My father-in-law, Rev. Roy Colby co-pastor with Dr. James Spicer of Chapel on the Hill, president of the Oak Ridge Ministerial association and chairman of the Fair Housing council attended as did Rev. Alexander Stewart of First Presbyterian Church. Rev. Stewart also served as vice-chairman of the Human Relations Advisory Board.

The following Monday, Rev. Stewart traveled to Camden, Alabama to visit with four Black churches who were members of the integrated Union Presbytery. Rev. Geddes Orman of Norwood Presbyterian Church of Knoxville and Rev. James Reese of First Presbyterian Church at Knoxville College who was Black accompanied him. Rev. Stewart said they visited with the ministers and congregation officials of the four churches, went over their records, and discussed church business. Because Blacks were often denied public lodging, Rev. Reese stayed the night with friends in the area.

In the wee hours of the morning, Rev. Stewart and Orman were awakened and attacked by the man who rented them the motel room. Rev. Stewart was hospitalized due to the severe beating and broken arm inflicted by his attacker. Perhaps their assailant's false accusations of them coming to Camden to integrate it and of being Civil Rights workers was based on learning that one of their traveling companions

was a Black man. Or maybe they read of Rev. Stewart's attendance at the laundromat protest and his position on the Human Relations Advisory Board.

"Plenty for a Black man to be concerned about then. Some White people would go to church on Sunday morning and leave there and go hang a Black man on Sunday afternoon," a Scarborough community member shared.

"Not many of the churches were integrated. Not many came out quickly to changes in the community," Mrs. Silver said. "But Rev. Alexander Stewart did. He was one of the bravest of ministers."

Next in this Historically Speaking series will highlight the details of the desegregation of the Multi-Matic Laundry. Thanks to Mike Stallo at the Oak Ridge Public Library for his help with Rachael Colby by digging out the newspaper articles she is using to fill in details not included in Dr. Spicer's *An Oak Ridge Story*.

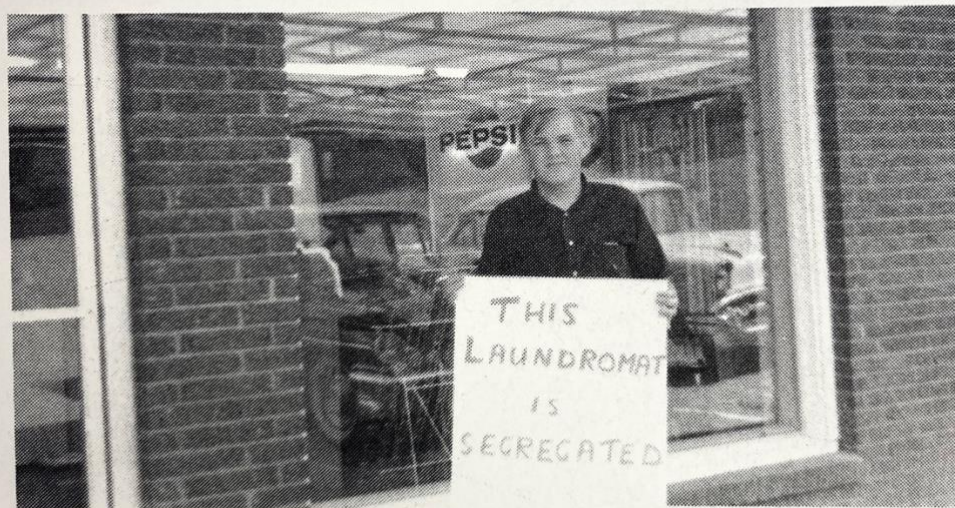
Rachael continues to desire to interview more people who lived this 1960's experiences. You can contact her through her website at: <https://tattooitonyourheart.com/>



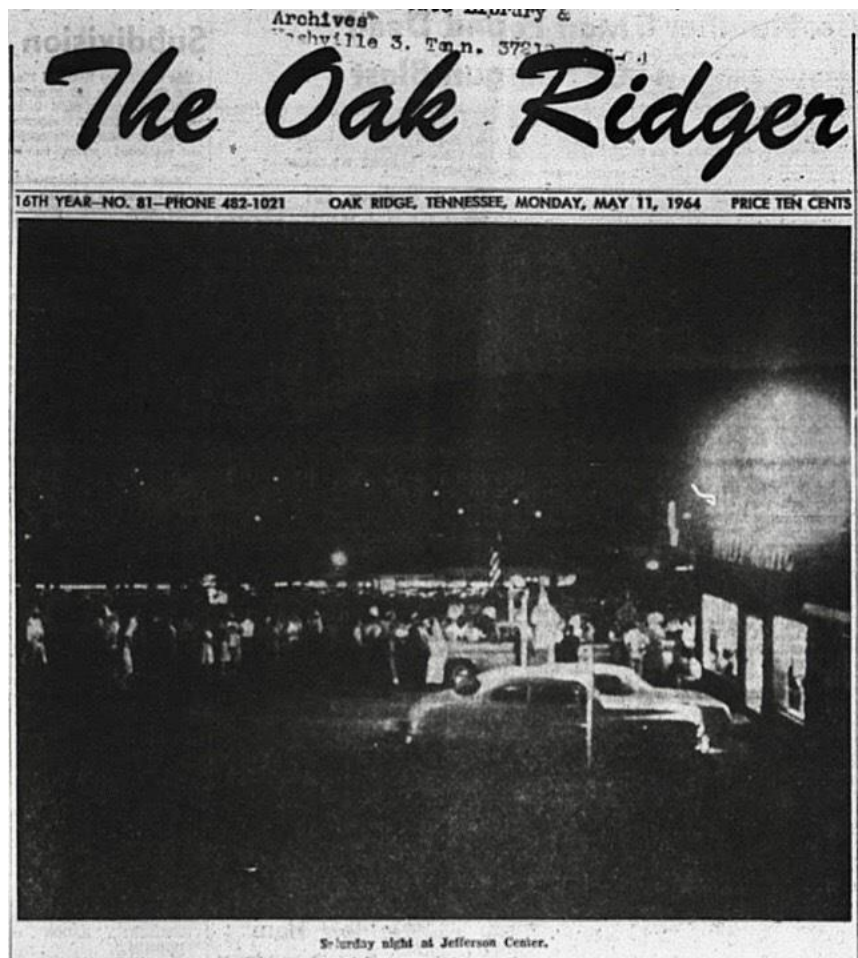
Born and raised in Jamaica, award-winning writer Rachael M. Colby resides in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Wife, mom, beach bum, artist, work in progress, avid Tweeter, Rachael writes to glorify God, encourage believers, and reach the lost. She connects culture's questions with Christianity's answers, inspires faith, and motivates through articles, devotions, poetry, and interviews. She has a heart for racial reconciliation and to uplift those who serve in tough places. Her work has appeared on *Southern Ohio Christian Voice* and *Inkspirations Online*. She runs on copious amounts of coffee and chocolate.

You can connect with Rachael on her website, TattooltOnYourHeart.com and on [Twitter \(@rachealcolby7\)](#), [Facebook \(racheal.colby.7\)](#), [Instagram \(@rachaelmcolby\)](#), and [YouTube \(https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE-fJkR1Cgu-KEnq74EqAQA\)](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE-fJkR1Cgu-KEnq74EqAQA).

The Congress of Racial Equality had an Oak Ridge chapter that picketed Multimatic Laundry over the issue of segregation in the summer of 1963.



Picketing in 1963



On May 11, 1964, a crowd gathered at Jefferson Center to bring attention to the segregated Multi-Matic laundromat