

Social Action in Action profile

Tom Streveler

A brush with Civil Rights history

By Barb Arland-Fye

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Tom Streveler was among four college friends, two Black and two White, who experienced a brush with Civil Rights history when they headed to school in a single car, a trip that included a leg through Louisiana and Mississippi. It was 1961, the year of the Freedom Rides, when Black and White people challenged segregation on interstate buses and bus terminals. Mobs and Ku Klux Klan members attacked the freedom riders, beating some of them severely, despite their nonviolent approach to seeking integration, according to Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.

"It seemed terribly odd that Blacks and Whites weren't allowed to be in the same vehicle. We were caught up in the Freedom Rides experience – (but) we weren't part of it," recalls Tom, now 84 and an active member of the

Justice and Peace Commission of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace Parish in Clinton.

Tom and his White buddy picked up their Black friends in Louisiana and across the border in Mississippi before driving to New York where the four attended college. "We stopped to do laundry in this little town where we saw a huge sign on the laundromat that contained a derogatory message banning Black people. I didn't understand what that meant, exactly."

"We were sitting out on the hood of the car, killing time waiting for the laundry to get done," Tom said. "Suddenly, three squad cars showed up." The officers, who were "reasonably polite, didn't explain what we were doing wrong. They said, 'You boys don't want to be here.' They probably did us a favor. God only knows what would have happened if we had stayed there." After the men retrieved their laundry, a squad car escorted their car out of town. "Once we were at the city limits, they left and we went on our way."

"I was so naïve, coming from Wisconsin," Tom said. "It didn't make any sense to me why we couldn't go into the same restrooms. It was that separation experience and the way (the Black

students) were treated that stayed with me as a young college kid. In a sense we were just passing through (the South) but it turned out to be an unusual experience.”

Trajectory toward social justice

Tom’s encounter with segregation shaped his practice of the Catholic faith in ways he never anticipated. After earning a bachelor’s degree in classical studies (which he discovered wasn’t his passion), Tom moved on to DePaul University in Chicago to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees in chemistry.

Chicago “was the place to be in the late 1960s and early 1970s because of the whole Civil Rights Movement,” he said. “King was there, at times, Jesse Jackson was there. I was there during the Democratic National Convention when the riots broke out (because of turmoil in the country over the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War).

Along with his studies, Tom worked part-time as a teacher and principal for a small Catholic elementary school of mostly Black students on Chicago’s south side. (Long before his presidency, Barack Obama was a community organizer in that same neighborhood some 15 years after Tom left the area.) Tom describes his Chicago experience as fascinating. “I learned so much being with the people. That little school did such a good job. We relied completely on archdiocesan support.”

Tom’s growing interest in education led to a career in higher education. After working for Ottumwa Heights College in Ottumwa, he moved on to Mount Marty University in Yankton, South Dakota. While in South Dakota, he earned a PhD in higher education administration and with his wife, Nancy, began serving as foster parents.

Nancy had learned of the need for foster parents and Tom supported her commitment. “We had our own kids, five or six at the time (out of eight total).” The foster children, most of whom were Native American, meshed with the Streveler children, entertaining each other, Tom jokes. Later, the family moved to Macomb, Illinois, where Tom served at Western Illinois University before moving on to Pennsylvania State University, from which he retired about 20 years ago.

The Church as connecting point

Throughout his career, “the Church became our contact point. We got involved in the things that our church was involved in,” Tom said. At present, Tom volunteers with Mobile Meals, Prince of Peace School Foundation, Victory Mission, the Justice and Peace Commission of Prince of Peace Parish and the Diocese of Davenport’s Social Action Commission. He also serves as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion for the homebound.

Tom and Nancy moved to Clinton around 2006, a city they selected for its location along the Mississippi River. Eventually, “We got involved with the Sisters of St. Francis and their social justice issues,” Tom said. “They are the social justice heart of the city. They have done so much and are always in the lead.”

He sees a greater need for education about Catholic Social Teaching and encourages Catholics to read the encyclicals of the popes, from Leo XIII to Leo XIV, which he has done. "If people would read (the encyclicals), they would respond," Tom said. He also believes that the Peace Soup Program during Lent provides another valuable learning opportunity.

Among the most pressing issues of our time is racism, Tom believes. "It has shaped our economy, our geography, and it shapes our law." Education, coupled with a willingness to thoughtful, humble dialogue in person and sharing views in a nonthreatening manner on various media platforms, are essential. "It is through knowledge that we gain understanding. Understanding leads to us to act with compassion and justice."