

UNFORGETTABLE EPISODES IN FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION

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Editor's Note: Katherine A. Kendall is one of the founders and former Executive Director of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Currently, she serves as volunteer consultant and honorary life member of the CSWE Board of Directors and International Commission. In addition, she is the retired Secretary General of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and currently serves as Honorary President and honorary life member of the Board of Directors. Dr. Kendall is the author of numerous books and scholarly works on social work and social work education, the most recent (2002) of which is Council on Social Work Education: Its Antecedents and First Twenty Years. In this narrative, Dr. Kendall shares for the first time in publication historically significant recollections about her early work with poor and disenfranchised Black clients as a social worker in Louisiana during segregation, and her later work at CSWE with Whitney Young, Jr. in developing the first organizational policies and accreditation standards prohibiting schools of social work from discrimination on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, and creed.

A social work career that spans more than sixty years is certain to have had some unforgettable episodes. Of the many I could recount, there are three that bear directly on this special issue of *Reflections*. Two of the three occupy a special hidden corner in my memory. These two are unique because of the special circumstances involved and the ethical dilemmas that were faced and resolved.

The first episode recounts my work in promoting the self-efficacy, aspirations, and education of an impoverished Black female client who understandably was enraged at the system of segregation as well as mistrustful of a White welfare worker. The second episode details my efforts to circumvent segregation policies in the South, when I had to work within the existing values and structures of the times. These earlier practice experiences predate the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregation. The third episode occurred not long after the Supreme Court decision and describes a shared experience with Whitney Young, Jr., then Dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, to frustrate an attempt to continue segregation in a proposed new school of social work in Atlanta. It is these latter two episodes that have remained hidden because deception was involved. While I knew I had unquestionably done the right thing, I had no desire to reveal fully what had been said or

done to uphold what to me was obviously a greater good.

Discovering Social Work and Segregation

During 1937-39, I was a graduate student at Louisiana State University (LSU), which just had established a school of social work. But before I tell that story, I must let you know how I happened to be in Louisiana and the discoveries I made there.

From high school through my undergraduate years, I set my sights upon a career as a foreign correspondent. That all changed during a period of three years in Europe following graduation from the University of Illinois. Those were the years of the Great Depression. Left-wing influences while living in London, Oxford, and Madrid opened my eyes to the injustice of poverty and all its miserable consequences. It soon became clear to me that fighting that kind of injustice was infinitely more important than writing about it.

I became determined to do something "social" with my life but didn't know what until I found social work. My husband, a Rhodes Scholar whom I had married in London, had been recruited to teach political science at LSU in Baton Rouge. That was where I discovered the profession that has



since shaped my life. It was also where, for the first time, I discovered at least some of what it means to be Black in a racist environment.

When I entered the newly established School of Social Work at LSU, my idea of what social work should do leaned heavily toward preventing and eradicating the causes of poverty and injustice, even to the point of the profession eventually no longer being needed. However, it wasn't long after my introduction through field work to the victims of poverty that I recognized the importance of the remedial and therapeutic functions of social work. Ever since, it has been my belief that the profession must be centrally involved in the dual mission of helping individuals and actively working for social change. It was in field work, too, that I found myself for the first time face-to-face with the injustice of racial discrimination. Most of my clients were Black and it was not easy to bridge the color gap. But there was one client in particular who trusted me enough to take me deeply into her world of segregation with its many obstacles and dehumanizing elements.

The Case of "Mary T"

Mary T. applied to the Baton Rouge Parish (County) Department of Public Welfare for Aid to Dependent Children. Prior to the passage of the Social Security Act, she had off and on received poor relief. This was one of the cases assigned to me as a first-year student in field work. I couldn't have had a better introduction to the challenges and rewards of social work.

On my first home visit, it was a blow to my naive expectations of a warm welcome as a messenger of hope to be greeted with open hostility. Mary made no secret of the fact that welfare was a last resort, a hateful necessity because no other source of income was available to support the family of five children. Her husband, now permanently disabled with a heart condition, had formerly

done well as a skilled construction worker. Unemployment during much of the Depression period, followed by illness, effectively put an end to his role as a wage earner and as the head of the family.

My own aversion to the giving of assistance as a charitable handout and strong conviction about the responsibility of government to provide economic support as an entitlement probably had something to do with a warming of the relationship. By the end of the academic year, Mary had begun to talk freely about discriminatory treatment in her experiences with government agencies. She could hardly contain her anger as she described how White children, but no Black children, were given orange juice in the emergency relief programs. It was the injustice of it as much as the deprivation for her children that fueled her anger.

There was not much that could be done in my first year as Mary's caseworker to help her achieve the economic independence and respect as a human being that she so deeply desired. Fortunately, thanks to the State Department of Public Welfare, we had a second chance.

Upon graduation, I joined the Baton Rouge Welfare Department as their first qualified social worker (meaning the first person employed who had received a master's degree in social work). The State Welfare Department, located in Baton Rouge, was created after passage of the Social Security Act. Staffed by a number of highly qualified social workers, several imported from the North, it had promoted and, to a considerable extent, supported the new School of Social Work at LSU. To further their special interest in training, they persuaded the local department to use my appointment to demonstrate what could be achieved through professional education along with access to adequate resources.

My assignment was to put together a specialized case load and work intensively

with some 20 plus cases where I saw potential for independence. Mary T. headed the list. We had previously explored employment opportunities so I already knew it was her great ambition to become a midwife for the community in which she lived. For that, she needed training not available in Baton Rouge. However, a course was available in New Orleans at Charity Hospital, the major resource of medical care for welfare clients throughout the state.

An ambulance made daily round trips from Baton Rouge to New Orleans with welfare patients. It was not too difficult to arrange for Mary to become a regularly scheduled passenger. With transportation arranged, we then concentrated on completing the course. When she got stuck, she called me. Together, we struggled with the medical terminology. Although limited in formal education available to Blacks, Mary had a strong native intelligence and an even stronger desire to make something of her life, and she succeeded.

She also had ambitions for her children. One of her sons was doing well in school and she wanted him to become a lawyer. For her two daughters, she had a different kind of ambition. She wanted them to be admitted to mulatto society in New Orleans, with all the perks associated with what she regarded as a great distinction, especially at Mardi Gras.

I left Baton Rouge just as she was finishing the midwifery course. I often wondered what she had finally done with the training and her life. Imagine my delight and complete surprise when she turned up some years later at the front door of my apartment in Chicago where I was working on my doctorate. She had learned in Baton Rouge that I was at the University of Chicago. To find my address, she went to the Council on Social Agencies where she happened to ask someone who knew me.

I was absolutely flabbergasted when I saw her, and could hardly wait to hear what

had brought her to Chicago. She had come to enroll her son in the pre-law program at Loyola University for which he had received a scholarship. As for her own ambition, the midwifery course had a very different and much more profitable outcome than either of us had anticipated. Not long after she had completed the course, she was recommended by a white obstetrician to a patient with a newborn child who needed help upon leaving the hospital. This led to recommendations by other doctors and from other patients. Her practice with white clients gave her financial security and a new career, although it did mean not working in the Black community, which was her original intent.

There were other success stories in that year of working with a small caseload and the possibility, although no guarantee, of adequate resources to support treatment plans. But the story Mary told me on that long ago surprise visit in Chicago remains one of the happiest memories of my career.

An End Run on Segregation in New Orleans

In the summer between the first and second year at LSU, I took a position in New Orleans as a junior caseworker in the newly established Parish Department of Public Welfare. Louisiana had in many respects the good fortune of starting its welfare programs from scratch, as a result of New Deal legislation. There was no problem in getting rid of what had existed before. I was assigned to a section of the French Quarter, with a diversified caseload that included certifying clients for the different categories of public assistance.

In my first round of visits, I was particularly attracted to two elderly sisters living in a rundown apartment in genteel poverty. Everything was worn but clean as a pin, with lace doilies on the arms of shabby chairs. They had dressed for the occasion of my visit in their very best clothes, again very

worn, but neat and tidy, with touches of lace at the neck and wrists. In their person and in their home, they seemed to belong to another era of Southern gentility. They were living on a pittance from what had previously been parish poor relief, with some additional funds from their church. Introductory visits clearly established their eligibility for Old Age Assistance.

As they had always lived in New Orleans, I experienced no difficulty in finding official records of their birth. What I found, however, was the surprising disclosure that they were officially classified as mulatto. They looked white and, from what I had seen and the little I had learned about them during my visits, it was clear they had no idea they were other than white. I'll never know how they became registered otherwise, but my fantasies about how it happened had a strong romantic flavor. Was this a story of love made legally impossible because of segregation—a man and a beloved mulatto woman who, perhaps, died early leaving him with two baby girls whom he brought up as his own? Did the doctor or midwife, unbeknownst to him, reveal their origin?

What I did know was the devastating change it would make in what was left of their lives if I used those birth certificates as proof of age. This was the deep South and I shuddered to think of the humiliation to which they would be subjected. I could picture them coming to the Welfare office in their best clothes, wearing hats and gloves, and finding there was a separate entrance for Blacks. They would be called by their first names and because of their "uppity" appearance, they would face other humiliations as well.

The idea of exposing those two very old ladies to the fact that they were registered at birth as mulattos and what that would mean was more than I could bear. Leaving the birth records behind, I heaved a sigh of relief because there were other ways of proving age. With the help of church records, they were approved for Old Age Assistance and

continued the quiet tenor of their lives with the security of an assured income.

Facing an ethical dilemma, I kept silent about what I had discovered. Perhaps my supervisor and other qualified social workers in the Department would have backed me up, but I couldn't take the chance. Fortunately, no one asked whether I had checked for birth certificates, so I did not have to lie. However, deception was involved. Having been brought up in the Highlands of Scotland under the unbending rules of conduct of strict Presbyterianism, this troubled me. But not for long. The sin resided in the system of segregation, not in my concealment of damaging information that would unalterably change the lives of two dear old ladies.

Looking at this episode from contemporary values that celebrate multiculturalism and racial and ethnic diversity, readers of today might question why the sisters' mixed race heritage was not acknowledged. In making the decision at the time, I struggled with a number of ethical questions and dilemmas. Was it right for me to make a decision for clients of sound mind? Practice principles are not immutable. In this situation, I could see no conflict with good practice. If the sisters knew they were mulatto but had always passed as white, how could I expose their secret? If they did not know, what good would be served by making it known to them? Ultimately, I was satisfied I had done the right thing and could only pray that there would never be another occasion for the Welfare Department to check their age. If I could not directly challenge segregation practices at the time, at least I could take steps to circumvent the devastating impact they would have on vulnerable, elderly clients ill equipped to handle it.

On Shaky Ground in Atlanta

Whitney Young, Jr., at that time Dean of the Atlanta University School of Social Work, is the major actor in the last episode I shall

describe. During my tenure as Educational Secretary at the Council on Social Work Education, I was in charge of accreditation and consultation services. In the course of working together on accreditation and curriculum development, Whitney and I became good friends and trusted colleagues. Sometime in 1958, in the years immediately after the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawed segregation, Whitney called with an urgent request that I come to Atlanta. He had arranged for me to attend a meeting to advise a group that had been organized to start a new school of social work. He was convinced that the main purpose was to circumvent the Court decision by making available another option for white students in the Atlanta area. (At the time, many Southern states were actively defying the Court's ruling by reaffirming segregation laws and practices, particularly by seeking to establish private, white-only educational institutions.)

When I arrived in Atlanta, instead of our usual kiss-kiss on the cheek greeting, he motioned me to stay at arm's length. He also asked me to ride in the back seat of the car, which I absolutely refused to do. I remember him saying something to the effect that feelings were running high in the community and it would be my fault if anyone threw stones at us. But no one did.

What transpired next was never recorded because Whitney and I were not sure of the ground on which we stood. Thus, my memory is weak on a number of important details. However, I do remember clearly going into a meeting of some 10 or 12 people, almost all from the Atlanta community. An educational institution was involved, but I no longer remember its name. It was not the University of Georgia. It may have been a women's college, as that would have been a logical location because it already limited admission on the basis of gender.

In my role as educational consultant, I followed the usual routine of exploring their interest, the need in the community for another school of social work, its purpose, and so on. Eventually, we got around to practical questions about recruitment and admission of students. They openly declared that it would be restricted to white students only. I immediately replied that, after the Supreme Court decision, the Council on Social Work Education would never accept such a program. I told them that without CSWE accreditation, their students would not find positions as qualified social workers. This put a stop to their efforts and nothing further was heard about a school of social work in Atlanta for white students only!

However, Whitney and I realized we were on shaky ground. At the time, there was no specific CSWE accreditation standard prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race. Nevertheless, I was positive that the values of the profession, as reflected in accreditation standards, would uphold the position that the school could not be accredited. This was the ethical dilemma and the reason the episode was not recorded. No definite standard existed other than clear professional values. Was that sufficient justification for my statement that the Council would not accept a segregated school as a member? Whitney and I were convinced of the rightness of our decision, but had no desire to broadcast it widely, although Whitney did refer to it with pride at a dinner meeting of the graduate deans with Council staff at the Annual Program Meeting in Chicago in 1960.

After making a verbal report on the Atlanta meeting upon my return to the office, the staff immediately moved to develop a nondiscrimination standard for inclusion into the Manual of Accreditation. Council archives reveal that the Board of Directors and the Commission on Accreditation were quick to respond, but with a generalized policy statement rather than a specific standard

(CSWE document # 9-12-27M). The Board referred the question to the Commission, asking whether the subject should be dealt with in the Manual. The Commission believed that an interpretation of the admission standard already in place would cover discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color without further specification. The issue of an explicit standard seemed to them to be a question of professional ethics, better to be addressed by the Board of Directors in an official statement of policy. Following preparation and adoption of a position statement prepared by a subcommittee, the Commission concluded that the question was broader than the development of a standard on discrimination.

The position statement, approved by the Commission in May 1959, outlined the ways in which discrimination on the grounds of race, color or ethnic origin was inconsistent with the philosophy, objectives, and methods of the profession and thus with social work education. The statement concluded with a request to the Board to promulgate as official policy that no discrimination be practiced by CSWE in *any* of its activities or by *any* of the commissions, committees, or other bodies associated with it. The action taken by the Commission reflected its belief that the question needed broader discussion and action by the constituency. And that is where the problems arose, greatly delaying the final adoption of a specific accreditation standard.

Part of the problem had to do with a touchy power relationship between the Board of Directors and the House of Delegates. The original CSWE bylaws designated the very large delegate group, then called the Council of Delegates, as the major legislative body of the Council. Their responsibility included approval of accreditation standards, bypassing the Board of Directors, which was given the minor charge of appointing a committee to consider appeals from Commission decisions (Kendall, 2002).

Vesting policy-making in a body that met once a year with no payment of expenses and little opportunity to study the issues requiring policy decisions almost immediately proved unworkable. A six-year process of revision of the bylaws ended in 1958 with a number of significant changes, giving full legislative authority to the Board, with the House of Delegates serving as an advisory and consultative body to the Board.

This shift in relationship may have affected the way in which the Board dealt with the recommended policy statement on discrimination. It concluded that the statement referred by the Commission covering all the operations of the Council needed the widest possible consideration. The House of Delegates was asked at its Annual Meeting in January, 1960, to appoint its own committee to draft a statement that, after review by the delegates, would be referred to the Board. If approved, the policy would be returned to the Commission of Accreditation as the basis for establishing a binding standard in the Accreditation Manual (CSWE document # 60-26-3).

Reporting back at the Annual Meeting in January, 1961, a committee of the House of Delegates presented a statement of the responsibilities of the Council in relation to discrimination on the basis of race, color, or ethnic origin. The spirited discussion that followed introduced a new issue that further delayed a decision. A question was raised about the omission of creed. In reply, it was stated that no reference was made to religion because earlier attempts at a more comprehensive statement proved too controversial. Whitney Young, speaking as a delegate, strongly opposed the wording of the statement, finding it vague and meaningless and called for a specific reference to segregation.

Two amendments, passed by large majorities, added creed to the list as well as wording that assured access to social work

education without discrimination or segregation. Upon receiving the revised statement, the Commission on Accreditation in December, 1961, produced a two-paragraph standard in which creed and the specific reference to segregation did not appear (CSWE document 61-12-31B). The standard was based on the requirement that the ethics of the profession mandated a school of social work to conduct its program without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or ethnic origin. In April, 1962, reconsideration of the question of creed led to its inclusion in the final version referred to the Board of Directors. Finally, a standard on non-discrimination was adopted by the Board in March, 1963.

Conclusion

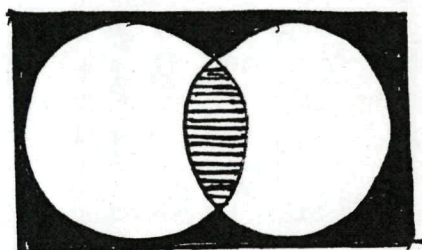
It was a long journey from my social work training and early casework experiences with Black clients in Louisiana, to the meeting in Atlanta in 1958 with a group seeking to establish a white-only school of social work, to the adoption of a CSWE binding accreditation standard against discrimination on the basis of race or color in social work education. In retrospect and in spite of the delays, it seems to me the underlying belief on which all agreed throughout the process was exactly what had motivated Whitney and myself in 1958. Given the ethics and philosophy of social work and social work education, no other outcome was possible.

References

- CSWE document # 9-12-27M: Minutes, Meeting of the Commission on Accreditation, May 23-24, 1959. Council on Social Work Education master file.
- CSWE document # 60-26-3: Minutes, Annual Business Meeting of the House of Delegates, January 19, 1960. Council on Social Work Education master file.

- CSWE document # 61-12-31B: Proposed addition to the the Manual of Accrediting Standards, December 11, 1961. Council on Social Work Education master file.

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