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"Be honest about what you see, get out of the way and let the story reveal itself." Anderson Cooper

Monday, February 27, 2006

The greatest lesson of all?

I've often asked myself, as I'm sure some of you have, do bad things happen for a reason? Well, in Pascagoula, Mississippi, there are three pint-sized little girls who were brought together by Hurricane Katrina. Their names are Anna, Kered and Christina, and they are third-graders at Resurrection School.

Before the storm, nearly all the students at Resurrection were white. Kered, who is black, attended St. Peter the Apostle, an all black school. But Katrina caused Kered's school to crumble, and along with it 100 years of racial separation.

St. Peter had nowhere else to turn for its students to learn, so it was decided all the students, black and white, would go to school together at Resurrection. Now, of the more than 300 students at Resurrection, 55 are black. The lesson plan is the same, but the faces sure have changed.

Little Anna told me, "I didn't think it was very fair. That's why Martin Luther King was here. I kept hoping other 'colored' kids were gonna come here." And Kered told me, about her old school, "I loved St. Peter with my whole heart. It's just that I want white friends. I couldn't take it."

It's amazing to hear such thoughts about race and prejudice from 9-year-olds. I think these girls can teach all of us, especially adults, some important lessons about acceptance and friendship. What do you think?

Posted By Randi Kaye, CNN Correspondent: 4:27 PM 58 Comments

I used to live in Nova Scotia, the closest Canada can relate to the American South, in terms of culture and economy (Farming communities, fisheries, homey feel, etc.) and I never recall any segregated schools there, yet alone in this day and age. I find it sad that it took a disaster of biblical proportions to change this.

Posted By Lima, Toronto, Ontario : 4:52 PM

Those girls are wise beyond their years.

Posted By C.Hatcher,Atlanta,Ga. : 5:03 PM

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It's great to hear the words of those little girls about their view on race. If only everyone had that attitude. Unfortunately, through hate or ignorance, there will always be those who won't see the bigger picture and remain with their sheltered attitudes.

Posted By Hector, San Diego, CA : 5:04 PM

That's great that the kids are in the same classroom, but the real test is the tables at lunch. All of my schools from elementary to high school practiced some level of voluntary segregation. At lunch, the truth shows clear. The black kids don't want to eat with the white classmates. It's time for them to grow up and intergrate.

Posted By Nathan, Hyannis MA : 5:19 PM

You want to solve the race problems in America then just turn the matter over to our kids and watch them work. Race problems only occur when adults intervned and impose their adult feelings. It's a shame that so many adults pass their hatred on to their children and at the same time call themselves "good christians". What a joke.

Posted By Stan M, Baton Rouge, LA : 5:20 PM

St. Peter the Apostle School was the location of my first teaching experience nearly 20 years ago, as I entered the field of education after an early career as a newspaper reporter. Although it is easy to assess St. Peter's as a racially separate, unequal environment inherently unfair, I simply must say that this place was the MOST special of all schools in which I have taught. As a lay teacher among strict but loving Irish Catholic nuns whose mission was dedicated to educating African American children in the South, my eyes were popped wide-open to discover there was still such a thing as a completely racially segregated school. I soon came to appreciate this special place for what it was -- few resources, but a genuine place for nurturing and love. Unlike in public school education, there were no discipline problems here that took away from the educational process. The parents were right there, wholly a part of the system, in church with their children on Sundays, and at the school within an hour if a teacher called with a problem. Some of us struggle with racial issues in public schools today that cannot be described in print for fear of misperception. St. Peter's did not have the financial resources, but it had a whole, whole lot of intangibles that many of the richer schools in which I have taught have not contained.

Posted By Pat Duffey, Hickory, NC : 5:23 PM

Out of the mouths of babes. I guess as a Californian I didn't think much about it. And my kids, growing up in a neighborhood with lots of military, thought even less about it. It is a bit sad that in the 21st century it took a disaster to bring these children together. But it is a VERY happy thing that they are finally getting to be in school together and make friends. We can but hope that Their children won't have to think about it at all.

Posted By Frank Luxem, Tustin, CA : 5:23 PM

A nice idea, but adolescence, beliefs at home, and institutionalized racism lie ahead for these little girls. In spite of my negativity, I sure am pulling for them.

Posted By John, Tallahassee, FL : 5:24 PM

I totally agree. Children are the innocence, devoid of the hatred that us adults teach them about other human beings. It is just sad that these children cannot "rebell" agaisnt this form of separation, for if so, our future as acountry, no, our world would be a much secure place.

Posted By BWH, Chicago, Illinois : 5:27 PM

I thought all schools were integrated, although for various reasons some more than others. I was surprised to hear there were still fully segregated schools in the south. The children are to congratulated and admired for being more than their society has shown them by example.

Posted By Duane Little, Stroud, Oklahoma : 5:33 PM

This story is very heart-warming and I think it should teach us all about the impact racism may or may not have on the younger generations. Being raised in this situation, the girls would be expected to just accept these things, yet they could see that something was not right. That really makes me happy.

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Posted By Megan Bennett, Douglas Georgia : 5:34 PM

wow.

Very touching.... talk about "out of the mouths of babes!"

Posted By Tony, Jacksonville AR : 5:39 PM

I didn't know that there were still segregated schools....

I DO know all you have to do is LISTEN to a child and there's a great deal they can teach us all.

Posted By Colleen, Ottawa, Ontario : 5:39 PM

Segregation and racism are no longer tolerable in public discourse in the US. This was a major step forward initiated by the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s.

However, segregation does still exist in an unspoken and, for the majority of white population centers, unseen form. Just go and look at the statistics for the average lifespan, income, etc. of african-americans today and compare them to those of whites. Look at the settlement patterns of blacks vs. whites.

Segregation is no longer enforced by one racial group against another, but has become a simple fact of our infrastructure. It has become largely economic in most places, making it doubly difficult to discuss clearly.

Only events like Katrina can now bring it to the forefront of our nation's consciousness.

Posted By Rob, Mesa, AZ : 5:40 PM

Its hard to believe that little children in the South are continually exposed to segragation. I believe that the South is still living in the 1950s.

Posted By George, Media, PA : 5:41 PM

Children are so pure and innocent. Its us adults that make them corrupt by placing our 'ideals' and pseudo-values on them. As cheesy as it may sound, the world would be a better place if we could all retain that pure and innocent value.

Posted By Kelly - Cygent, Ohio : 5:43 PM

Agreed!

That fact that in this day and age the young lady refer to black people as "colored" says alot.

Posted By Lois, Los Angeles, CA. : 5:45 PM

Not all racism has left since hurricane Katrin. In fact, the Mayor (frogive me if I'm wrong) said New Orleans should be a "Chocalate City"---->tell me that's not a racist comment.

Posted By Wendy, Laurel, MD : 5:47 PM

Wow!! I'm from the West Indies and we're predominantly black and/or indian. We grew up with the stigma of class prejudice but not racial prejudice. I'm amazed that the little girl Anna is still using the word "colored". That -- right there -- says alot. I hope it will all turn out for the best -- bringing about unity for all ages. Grown ups can stand in the way of progress!!

Posted By M. Weekes, Los Angeles, CA : 5:47 PM

It is great that children of different ethnicity are getting to know each other better; however, when the word "Colored" is used to refer to African-Americans that in itself should question how sincere the little girl or her parents feel about integrating schools. Little kids are not born racist they are taught it. I hope little Anna learns for herself not to judge a person for their color but rather their character because it is obvious she is not getting that lesson from home.

Posted By P. Sims, Milwaukee, Wisconsin : 5:51 PM

I agree. Hopefully the new generation can do what no other generation has fully done and that is to teach everyone that racial discrimination (or any form of discrimination) should not be tolerated. Many people today both white and black still hold the views that were taught to them by their elders and both sides have been taught to hate. Once hate is no longer taught or shown, we have a good chance to grow as a country. These little girls are our future, don't you think we should listen to them, learn from them and change for them?

Posted By andrea, utica ny : 5:51 PM

It further illustrates, just how much work there is, that needs to be done in this country towards better race relations. It would be truly terrible if we still had the same problem fifty years from now. Those in charge need to work much harder to stomp out racism whenever and wherever it may present itself. Will it still be this way fifty years from now?

Posted By Wayne, Wentzville Missouri : 5:56 PM

It is beautiful to see that these girls can understand how wonderful and important it is that both blacks and whites need to come together. I love that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was brought up by a young child. His dream lives on!

Even through this horrible disaster, there is a ray of light that shines through.

Posted By Kristie Madison, WI : 5:57 PM

With all the horrors that we read about daily, it make my heart rejoice, and gives me hope that out of chaos comes order. We should all listen and follow the lead of those little girls. These young Americans are showing the world our greatness, kindness and acceptance and that no matter what happens we are all one.

Posted By D. Beverly, Los Angeles, CA. : 5:57 PM

I think children can teach us the greatest lessons, most of the time. It is adults who draw lines and put up barriers to keep people out. Children live with open hearts and let anybody in. That is what makes them extraordinary, vulnerable and, above all, inspiring.

Picasso said that he spent his whole life trying to learn to draw like a child. I think many of us, once we are grown up, spend the rest of our lives trying to learn to love like a child.

Posted By Christine, Ontario, Canada : 5:58 PM

Interesting that in 2006, Blacks are still referred to as "colored". That says a lot about the adults in that child's life. I bet you don't see many "colored" and white kids hand in hand on St. Charles St. watching the parades together. This will truly be a "Mardi Gras To Remember", mostly Vanilla, the way that most whites want it.

Posted By Ann, Tallulah, La. : 5:58 PM

I think children everywhere would be prejudice and racism-free, if the adults did not teach it to them.

And de-segregating schools does not directly lead to a lack of racism in the community. I would say the connection is not there at all.

I grew up in Cincinnati in the 60's and 70's, and all our Catholic schools and churches were bi-racial.

I also find it sad that there is still racial segregation in our country.

Posted By Susan Asheville NC : 5:58 PM

This is an excellent example of how exposure to different kinds of cultures and races broadens the horizons of those exposed, and helps them see that we really aren't all that different from each other in the first place.

Exposure to other humans who look or act differently than yourself is, in fact, a profoundly humanizing experience. Opening the channels of communication and interaction between different kinds of people, especially at a young age, sets an example for these "future adults" to understand and experience the value of building cultural bridges rather than cultural

cultural perspective. (lack of insurance or no insurance; unable to rebuild their homes; unable to relocate.

I am currently reading Taylor Branch's *At Cannan's Edge* and I am horrified by the way African Americans were treated in the South beaten, lynched and bombed. Law officials were as guilty as the Klan. Never convicted or punished for their crimes not even 20-30 years after the fact.

Perhaps the present will make some people face the error of their ways. My dad passed a couple of years ago and he used to march in the 60's. He used to tell me about his experiences in the civil rights movement ... I wish he was still alive oh what great conversations we would have!

Posted By Kathryn, Merrillville, Indiana : 6:20 PM

This is a rather interesting human interest story. I live in Pascagoula, and I am very close to people that have attended both schools as well as the school administrators. While Katrina did intergrate the schools in a literal sense, this is not exactly an accurate portrayal of the history of the schools. Resurrection, did in fact have some black children, as well, as some Asian American, Children, and quite a few Mexican children, well before the hurricane. St. Peter was in an all black school, however, they were not segregated in the 1965, "My child will never go to school with a Ni**er" sense that the story makes it sound. St. Peter was built in a predominantly black community as a mission school. The order of nuns that ran the school had ministry to poorer black communities as their mission. The way the story sounds they schools were "segregated" when in reality, they were only segregated in so much the school was in a mostly black neighborhood. I realize that to an outsider, this sounds like unspoken segregation, but it was what it was. The black community was very proud of St. Peter's and are very sad to see it close.

Posted By Patrick, Pascagoula, MS : 6:24 PM

It's not only lessons regarding segregation to be learned, but lessons concerning all of mankind.

How many of us watching the post-Katrina devastation on the TV, absent the commentator's soundtrack, could have differentiated between New Orleans' Katrina and Phuket's Tsunami?

The REAL lesson is that we are ALL human beings who, stripped of our raiment, pride, and pretense, look amazingly identical.

Posted By James Hinckley, Baton Rouge, LA : 6:24 PM

I think it is wonderful that this young girl has the wisdom to understand that there is more important things in life than worrying about the color of our skin. I hope her maturity is contagious and can spread to others... old and young. What does bother me is a comment one reader said that the south still lives in the 1950s. Unfortunately this is an ignorant opinion (ignorant meaning uneducated). I was recently transplanted from North Carolina to Colorado and have noticed even more segregation here than back in Carolina. There are far fewer blacks in my workplace and frankly I have overheard stronger racially biased comments here than I ever did back home. It seems that most people who are critical of the South have never lived or spent a significant amount of time in the South. Maybe it is their opinions that are stuck in the 1950s.

Posted By Michael; Denver , CO : 6:27 PM

Very touching...as I recently told my mother....children learn RACISM from their parents...children have open minds until adults teach them how to close it....leave it to a child to teach us all

Posted By Tina, Las Vegas, Nevada : 6:29 PM

I think the key to this cutsey story should be a collective concern that there are still schools deemed predominantly "Black" or "White" by nothing more than economic status and the detrimental stereotypes that coincide with such labeling practices. The conscious act of segregation is not as profound as it once was, and thankfully because of the men and women who stood up to the obvious disadvantages of maintaining a society based on racial divide without advocating advancement and equal opportunity for all citizens. What strikes me as peculiar is why a feel-good race story is being pulled out of the Katrina fiasco when it is completely evident that the sponsored media is reluctant to push the envelope on the

barriers.

Little examples of progress like this, when repeated from community to community, sets the next generation up for a more humane and civil way of life: less war, less distrust, and more awareness and mutual respect. It is a world that I think we can all look forward to.

Posted By Aaron Kinney, Los Angeles, California : 6:01 PM

This is one of the most positive stories I have heard about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Children usually don't judge someone based on their race unless they are badly influenced by an adult or parent. I hope that after everything is back to normal, which hopefully will be soon, that there will be no more all "anything" schools ever again. I have always believed that bad things happen for a reason and it's usually a great one.

Posted By Marie, Los Angeles, CA : 6:03 PM

A child's mind untainted by the harsh world of racial and social separation. I hope they continue to think and feel this way. Yes, all things happen for a reason, good or bad. The key is to learn from the event and carry that lesson with you the rest of your life. Can't wait to see this story tonight Randi.

Posted By Rachel-Albuquerque, NM : 6:07 PM

The schools in New Orleans are not segregated by race.

The schools are however separated by district or geographical location and public vs. private.

Kered probably lives in a new district or area now and is attending a new school.

Posted By Ed - New Orleans, LA : 6:10 PM

You do realize both schools are tiny private schools, right? Resurrection School had 200 or so students and St. Peter the Apostle had about 66. The "racial segregation" was imposed on the kids by the parents, not the state. I honestly don't see why Randi Kaye even wrote this entry. Trying to stir up something that isn't really there?

Posted By Robert, Providence, RI : 6:10 PM

I am not surprised by this story at all. I am a white woman currently in my 20's who grew up in Long Island, New York. As kids in elementary school, I distinctly remember there being less division between races: white girls dated black boys, and we were all friends regardless of race. I found that by high school however, both whites and blacks had sided and separated. As teenagers and young adults we are exposed to the media, movies and society, in which race is frequently a dividing issue. My point is that race and racism is something learned, performed, and socialized. The divisions between white and black children at such a crucial time in development can only cause greater social problems and misconceptions about race down the line. Integration in schools is the key to a truly accepting and equal culture.

Posted By Jessica, New York, NY : 6:16 PM

The profound exchange of words between these little girls really Blessed me. If only we would have compassion and love for one another there wouldn't be such pain and suffering in this world. We must love one another regardless of economics and heritage. Life is so very short and challenging as is, we take so very much for granted. We can't continue living the same way - doing the same things and expecting change. That's lunacy. Change isn't change until we've changed. Selah.

Posted By P. U. Anderson Plano, Tx. : 6:18 PM