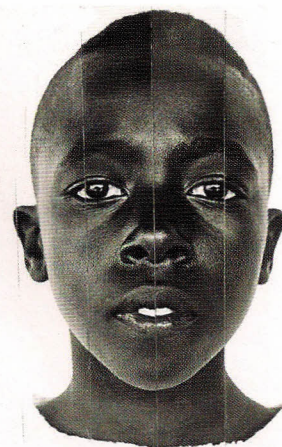


# NORRIS

i remember when

Written by **Stewart Lippe**, Hyde Park resident



After college, I luckily got a job teaching fifth grade in a small rural elementary school in North Central Florida. That is the Northern part of Florida, which had the Southern slave plantation culture in the nineteenth century and violently resisted changing that model in the twentieth century. The school board there had finally gotten around to integrating the public schools in 1969, sixteen years after the Brown vs. The School Board of Topeka, Kansas, Supreme Court decision.

Many of the white teachers decided that if they were going to integrate the schools they were going to quit, which they did. Southern ideology of exclusion was destroying itself. The desperate principle hired two friends of mine, and he still needed a fifth-grade teacher.

They gave him my name and number. I had just days before graduated from college after the summer session with a major in history and art history. I was considering the Vista program, which at the time was like the Peace Corp but in the United States, as a possible deferment from the military draft.

Neither my friends nor I had majored in elementary education, done any type of internship or knew anything about teaching elementary school. We were liberal arts majors trying as best we could to avoid being fodder for the U.S. Army's hopeless efforts in Viet Nam. There was an exemption to the draft for elementary school teachers, and that was all we needed to know about teaching elementary school. Unfortunately, the local school board had opted on the side of convenience rather than rational or common sense. They had placed the fifth-grade class from the white school and the fifth-grade class from the black school into the same classroom. Then they proudly proclaimed, "We have integrated."

Apparently, no one realized or cared that the African-American kids coming from segregated schools and very low-income families were not at the same grade level as their privileged white counter-parts. I discovered later that when the books at the white school were worn out and out of date, they would be passed on to the segregated black schools. Now that they had finally integrated, the school board left it to the teachers to sort out this vast discrepancy in grade levels in the same room.

The students were all pretty nice and respectful kids, oblivious to the integration issues that their parents had been wrestling with all their lives. But they knew something special was happening this year, so they were on their best behavior at first.

The first thirty days of school was a honeymoon, as I had recently graduated with a history degree, and I enthusiastically shared my knowledge with the children. I proceeded to lecture them on the development of Western civilization from the Ancient Greeks up to the current day. When I would finish my history lecture about an hour before lunchtime every day, a nice black kid named Derrick would always say "I'm hoongry, Mr. Jenkins." This was before the days of free breakfast, and I was too inexperienced to realize that his family could not afford breakfast, and so he was justifiably hungry at ten-thirty in the morning.

The first grading period was approaching, so I gave the class a quiz on my history "lectures." One-half of the class did all right on the test, but I was stunned to find out the other half barely answered any of the questions and the worst part was that half of them couldn't even write their own name at the top of the page. I asked them how they could sit there and let me go on and on when they didn't understand anything I was saying.

Norris, a very intelligent, but undereducated, black kid who was always reading the Bible or an Archie comic book said, "We had never heard words like that before, Mr. Jenkins." In a class of thirty-five students, fifty per-cent were black and, as I discovered over the next month, half of them were operating at two to three grade levels below the fifth-grade level expectations...and the other half were functionally illiterate. Not providing remedial tutoring to those black kids was criminal and set in motion the disasters in public education for the foreseeable future. Maybe that was

the theory: teach African American kids to be content bored and then they would be well trained to sit quietly when unemployed or in jail. I had to work out of a textbook that was way over the heads of half the class.

Kids are resilient to the obstacles that educators put in their way. Out of desperation, I started a tutorial program with some Vista volunteers to try and help the totally illiterate or some mentally challenged kids that would come to class intermittently. However, unknown to the administration, I also started a mentoring tutorial program in the classroom where the white kids would help the black kids in reading and math and the black kids would help the white kids in football and basketball. I was their P.E. coach as well.

Everyone was respected for their strengths, and their weaknesses were strengthened. Actually, I spent the first half of the year waking the students up and the second half of the year trying to quiet them back to sleep. At least they were enthusiastic about school, and I survived and avoided the draft for that year.

However, the selective service was hungry for human fodder, and with each New Year, they eliminated exemptions. After I graduated from college, they eliminated the "college exemption"; after I taught elementary school for a year they eliminated the "elementary school teacher exemption." They were relentless.

Thanks, kids for the breather.