

Civil Rights History Made on Woodland Boulevard

By Kathy Hersh

Something auspicious happened in downtown DeLand on February 9th in 1960, but not many people under age 70 are aware of the event. A group of students from DeLand's all-Black Euclid High School staged a sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter, still off limits to Blacks despite the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that "separate but equal" facilities discriminated against minorities. After being refused service at Woolworth's, the students crossed Woodland Boulevard and sat-in at the McCrory's lunch counter, where they were also refused service.

Segregation was still entrenched in the South and DeLand was no exception. Black residents seldom came downtown because experience had taught them they weren't welcome. Nevertheless, Euclid students, like most teens in the Sixties, liked to go to soda fountains after school and have a coke, even though they weren't allowed to sit at the counter.

"We got tired of ordering our cokes and having to go outside to drink them," recalls Joyce Cusack, one of the leaders of the sit-in that day. Their protest was only the second lunch counter sit-in to take place in Florida and may be the only one in the country that was organized by high school students.

Earlier that month, on February 1, college students sat in at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. The ensuing melee made national headlines.

Whether the Euclid students were inspired by this event, their families were aware of the risks. They were afraid their children might get expelled from school or injured. "Our parents begged us not to do it," says Cusack.

The reaction that day of White residents opposed to integration was heated and threatening. The City of DeLand police were called in and formed a barrier between the students and the counter-protesters.

The students repeated their action each day for a week. The lunch counters were closed indefinitely. When they re-opened some months later, they served all customers, regardless of color, in compliance with federal law.

Forty years later, Joyce Cusack was elected to the Florida legislature, the first Black person from Volusia County to be so honored. Only ten percent of Cusack's constituency was Black. The rest was White. "Those same folks [in 1960] who were saying 'let me get to them,' their grandchildren were saying let me get to the polls and vote for her." Cusack served two terms from 2000-2008. When she left, she was the second highest ranking Democrat in the Florida House of Representatives.

Last fall, Cusack was interviewed as part of the oral history project of the West Volusia Historical Society. * She reminisced

about growing up around Wright's Corner, once the thriving Black-business district of DeLand, currently undergoing restoration. Her grandmother owned a popular café in the Wright building – Smitty's Café. "I was raised by strong women," she says.

Cusack spoke glowingly about seeing Barack Obama elected as the first Black President. "I never expected to see that in my lifetime." She was invited to the inauguration and savored the moment when she shook President Obama's hand.

Towards the end of the interview, Cusack reflected on her long career spent in public service - first in the legislature and later in county government, creating programs that led to improvements in public health, housing, and job opportunities for the disadvantaged in Volusia County.

"All I've ever done is to try and do good, to make this place better than I found it. I could not have done it without the support of the people of Volusia County."

Cusack is a visionary but also a realist. "I was hoping that we would become a society where we were color-blind or that we accepted each other."

Despite social progress, she is concerned about the future. "It seems to me that we've lost the consciousness of doing what is good and honest and caring about people."

She hopes DeLand's youth will be inspired by the story of the courageous Euclid High students soon to be memorialized by bronze plaques on the two buildings where the sit-ins occurred.** Integrating "Black history" as American history in the heart of downtown DeLand is an important step forward. But, says Cusack, "Progress is slow... we still have miles to go."

*The full interview with Joyce Cusack can be viewed on the West Volusia Historical Society's YouTube page.

**Museum Store, 100 N. Woodland, and The Baumgartner Company, 101 N. Woodland

To donate to the plaque project, contact the West Volusia Historical Society for details, 386-740-6813.

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