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From the Editor's Desk

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From the Editor's Desk

There are two restaurants in the Delta town of Marks, Miss. There is the new McDonald's, one of those mini ones with a convenience store and gas pumps. And there is The Dining Room, a brightly lighted place where they serve great fried catfish and okra. Both restaurants are on the main drag, which is called Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. When King visited here more than 30 years ago it was widely reported that the poverty among African Americans in the town moved him to tears.

In February I visited Alex Quigley '99, who is a Teach for America teacher in the elementary school in Lambert, the next town over. I found that Colby was well represented in the area, with Tyler Peterson '00 doing his Teach for America stint at the high school in Marks. The three of us had dinner at The Dining Room, which is owned by a Mr. Figgs, whose son, Dwight Barfield, is mayor of Marks and works with Quigley. Quigley and Barfield have become friends, and at the restaurant that night there was a lot of banter between them. Barfield, who is African American, pointed out that he and Quigley—who is white, from Massachusetts—are from very different cultural backgrounds. "Growing up I never had real close friends of another ethnic group," Barfield said. "[Knowing Quigley] has taught me a lot."

Quigley's story appears here as part of a package on education reform. The story was not intended to be about race, but sadly it is. You can't talk about problems in America's schools without talking about race. You can't talk about race without talking about poverty. And in the greatest democracy in the world, the kind of education you get too often is directly related to how much money you have. How much money you have is too often related to the color of your skin.

It was obvious in Newark, N.J., where disadvantaged kids I visited at a charter school run by Jamie Verrilli '83 were all of color. It was obvious in Hartford, where Robert Furek '64 confronted a broken city schools system and concluded that our nation has written off countless thousands of African-American and Hispanic children. But nowhere was it more glaring than in the Delta.

I have a few indelible memories of Marks and neighboring Lambert, where Quigley's school is located: Quigley's kindergarten kids playing on the patch of gravel that served as a playground at Quitman Elementary. Young men standing outside a swaybacked backstreet Lambert tavern, only their eyes moving as strangers drove by. Quigley's story about coaching Little League and finding that there was another league for white kids. A little boy named Keith, whose hunger for knowledge was ravenous.

Enter Quigley and Peterson, fresh from Mayflower Hill. How could they possibly be prepared? What could they accomplish? Maybe big things, in a small way.

Quigley was intensely loyal to his students and his fellow teachers, repeatedly suggesting that the story be about them, not about him. He hoped showing the area's problems might somehow alleviate them, but he didn't want his community held up to ridicule. This is a guy, after all, who stayed in Mississippi for the summer, helping to coach three different ball teams. Peterson, who once canoed from Minnesota to Hudson's Bay, had rougher paddling at M.S. Palmer High School, where he worked to convince special-education students that reading was important to their lives. "I pretend to be a teacher" was his self-effacing comment at the restaurant that night. "For some reason they believe me."

Or maybe he isn't pretending at all.

Barfield said there was resentment when the Teach for America teachers first arrived. But the newcomers' work ethic and community spirit had won over the skeptics. he said, predicting the next group would be welcomed wholeheartedly. "They are the first," he said. "They have planted the seed."

And that, all by itself, is something.



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