

Y'all Come Back Next Time

-Marc J. Randazza

A long time ago, African American voters came to the polls in Florida, and they were turned away in droves. Although it was unlawful to openly disenfranchise them for the color of their skin, Jim Crow had a few tricks up his sleeve.

One trick that he used was sending “volunteers” to black peoples’ homes, to “help” them register to vote. After taking their registration information, these “volunteers” would discard the forms. The black voters, believing they were registered, would not discover the truth until election day – when it was too late to rectify the injustice. “Y’all come back in four years now,” the poll workers said with cheshire smiles as sugary as sweet tea. Some might come back....but some would get the message. “Negroes need not vote here.”

One gentleman, who carried himself with the greatest abundance of dignity, approached the poll where the all-white staff told him that he was not on the voter registration list. Fortunately for him, civil rights attorneys were present, and after a heated exchange, his name mysteriously appeared on the list. Many voters were told that although they were registered to vote, since they had not voted in two prior elections, they were placed on the “inactive list,” and were not welcome to vote.

“Y’all come back next time.”

The law provides that any “inactive” voter becomes “active” again upon presenting him or herself to vote, but the poll workers wouldn’t have any of that. The supervisor of elections’ office, through its attorney, sent the same message. “Maybe next time, son.” Again, civil rights attorneys were called, they rushed to the supervisor’s office, educated him on the law, and with the spotlight on him and no legal alternative, he agreed to accept the lawfully-submitted ballots.

Seeing this runaway enfranchisement, another election observer made a call. This observer was not a civil rights attorney, and the call wasn’t to the supervisor of elections’ office. Who she called is a mystery, but ten minutes after the call, a white van screeched to a halt in front of the polling center, and five stocky, buzz-cut white men (one shaved bald) in red shirts barged into the polling station and demanded the removal of the civil rights attorney. Poll workers, knowing that the attorney had a right to be there, were inclined to comply but did not – they had suffered two defeats at the hands of the civil rights attorney already. The civil rights attorney remained and continued to advocate for voters who were unlawfully disenfranchised. Finally, the gang of five thugs found a corrupt deputy who ejected the civil rights attorney from the polling place. His day was over.

And as if the reader didn’t see this coming....this wasn’t so long ago at all. Although this story sounds like something out of 1964, these events took place on November 2, 2004, and the civil rights attorney was the author of this piece.

Outside the polling station, I walked over to a chair, and fell into it. I thought that this battle ended before I was born. The emotion that sat on my shoulders and collapsed my whole body was shame – shame at being part of a society that still considered equal rights to be a nuisance, shame that I didn’t do more, shame that I was so naive that until Nov. 2, 2004, I truly disbelieved everyone who told me a story like this. But this time I was there. I couldn’t deny that it had happened, and I couldn’t deny that what I saw was an organized effort to deny people the right to vote for no greater reason than the color of their skin. November 2, 2004.

As I sat there with my shame, and my rage, a group of elderly women came over to me. One put her hand on my shoulder and told another about what I had done all morning. I barely choked back my cracking voice (and forgot my manners) as I said “I can’t believe this still fucking happens.”

The woman then told me, “son, I’ve been fighting that same battle for 40 years.”

“Y’all come back next time.....please.”

You can bet your life I will.