

Tour of Jim Crow Museum a Life-Changing Experience

By John Thorp

Feb. 15, 2006

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Birmingham Jail, 1963

If I were born with brown skin in a community up or down our river, then...

If you were born white like me, how you complete this sentence depends on a lot of different things: how well integrated into the majority community you are, how much influence the popular media have on you, how much American social history you know, how many people with brown skin count you as a friend...

My wife, Judy, and I thought we could do a decent job of completing this sentence before we adopted our three brown-skinned daughters. Were we wrong! To know that racism exists in American society is one thing, to live it everyday as our daughters have is another reality altogether.

In 1996 I began to get some inkling of what brown skin really means in this country. I started working with David Pilgrim to create the Jim Crow Museum (www.ferris.edu/jimcrow). David possessed a large collection of racist memorabilia and donated it to Ferris State University. The museum contains at least 4,000 everyday household, entertainment, and advertising items that defame African American men, women, and children. These images date from slavery, the Jim Crow era of US history, right up to the present day.

The Jim Crow Museum is the only publicly accessible museum of its type. Other museums explore slavery, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the accomplishments of African Americans. The Jim Crow Museum is the only museum that focuses on the artifacts that both shaped and reflected attitudes toward African Americans developed during the Jim Crow era -- roughly from the late 1870s to the mid-1960s.

All racial groups have been and are caricatured, but none have been caricatured as often or in as many ways as have African Americans. They have been portrayed in

popular culture as pitiable exotics, cannibalistic savages, hypersexual deviants, childlike buffoons, obedient servants, self-loathing victims, and menaces to society. These anti-black depictions are manifested in or on material objects: ashtrays, drinking glasses, banks, games, fishing lures, detergent boxes, and other everyday items.

Unfortunately, this kind of stereotyping has not stopped. It is no longer as blatant nor as commonplace as it was before the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, items from the past continue to be reproduced and new items created, advertised, and consumed. One of the most powerful aspects of a visit to the museum is encountering the brand new racist items the museum is collecting.

The museum uses racially charged and demeaning, everyday items to explore historical and current expressions of race prejudice and discrimination. These images engage visitors at the deepest emotional and intellectual levels, and make it possible for the museum facilitators to initiate and conduct powerful discussions about race and race relations. At a time when many Americans are afraid to talk openly about race relations, the museum makes possible powerful discussions about race, and offers exciting opportunities to teach tolerance and understanding to Ferris students, high school and college students from throughout Michigan, religious groups, business leaders, and many others.

The Big Rapids High School students from David Szot's poetry class have impressed me the most. They come to the museum every spring and then write poems about the experience. In their own way each of the poems I have read are a tribute to the power of this experience to change peoples' lives. Members of the first group were classmates of our youngest daughters, some of whom were their close personal friends and stood with them through the harassment their brown skin brought them.

I will never be able to truly complete the sentence I set out at the beginning of this article, but I do know that I can help visitors to the museum come to appreciate how hard it is being brown in this country. I also know that a visit to this museum forces a person to take a stand for or against the equality of all human beings.

If you would like to visit the Jim Crow Museum, assemble a group of friends or colleagues and call the museum at 231-591-5873. Until our fund raising drive to expand and endow the museum is successful, it is not possible to have walk-in visits. We have learned from experience that you don't want to encounter this material alone. We know people need and want to talk about the experience.

Be warned, a visit can be life changing.

David Pilgrim contributed to this article.



About the Author: John Thorp, administrative coordinator for Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, and his wife Judy have three daughters, a grandson and granddaughter. John wrote the article for the "Up and Down the River" series sponsored by the Mecosta Osceola Council for the Humanities and Arts (and published in the Big Rapids Pioneer). MOCHA is a project partially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the Michigan Humanities Council.