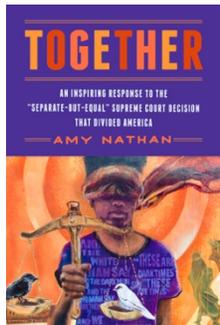


First Chapter of the book:



TOGETHER

An Inspiring Response to the “Separate-But-Equal”
Supreme Court Decision that Divided America

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CHAPTER 1: RULED OUT



Keith Plessy & Phoebe Ferguson, about seven years old

“Like all the boys in my neighborhood, I liked to play football and baseball in local parks,” said Keith Plessy, who grew up in New Orleans in the 1950s and ’60s. “The closest park in walking distance from my house had space for two baseball fields, and room for a football field between the baseball fields. It featured a swimming pool in the summer, too. But I was never allowed to play there as a child on Saturdays and Sundays. The park had a rule: Only white kids could play there on weekends.”

Keith and other children of color could stand outside the fence and watch the white kids play. “But we couldn’t go in. On days when we had the park, the white kids couldn’t come into the park, either. There wasn’t a sign with that rule. It was just understood that white kids had the park all day every weekend. We had to squeeze in our playing after school, before it got dark,” explained Keith.

“As a child, I was always questioning things when it came to the color of a person’s skin—why people who were considered to be ‘white’ got better treatment than others. I lived in a multi-racial neighborhood,” he noted. “There were African Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, Italian Americans, and Native Americans. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether people were Black or white. I’ve been called Puerto Rican several times. On some streets people got along like we were family.” But in other areas, some boys might beat him up. “It wasn’t discussed much at home or at school.”

Figuring out where he could and couldn’t go in his neighborhood wasn’t easy. “There were restaurants that wouldn’t let Black people come inside to eat. We had to go around to the back door and order food to take out.” Some white shopkeepers were nice, but others weren’t. “At one bakery shop, the lady behind the counter kept skipping me. Any white customer that came in, she would say, ‘Oh, what do you need?’ But it was like I wasn’t there.” So Keith took the ice cream sandwich he wanted to buy and walked out of the store. Then the shopkeeper noticed him—and almost had him arrested. The police called his mother to come get him.

“I got a good spanking when I got home. My mother said, ‘That’s not what we do. We don’t steal.’ But I told her, ‘They kept skipping me.’ So my mother told me, ‘Next time, put it down, and don’t

go to that store again. Go places where you won't be treated that way. Don't let anyone take your sunshine away from you.”

He loved his elementary school, but it got its start in the early 1900s because of another situation that didn't make sense to Keith as a child. The African American community had to create this school on its own because the city refused to provide an elementary school for children of color in Keith's neighborhood. Even years later, in the early 1960s, when Keith was ready to start elementary school, he and many other children of color still weren't allowed to attend the city's schools for white children. “It puzzled me a lot why there were these rules,” said Keith.

Confusing rules about skin color puzzled Phoebe Ferguson as a child, too. The same age as Keith, she lived in a different New Orleans neighborhood and went to a private elementary school that only white students attended. She had a babysitter that she loved, Minnie Lou Williams, who had helped take care of her since Phoebe was six months old. “We did a lot of fun things together,” Phoebe recalled. “We played together in the backyard, or went to nearby playgrounds to swing. We played ‘Go Fish’ a lot. Minnie took me trick-or-treating, too.”

However, one day an unfair rule ruined a fun afternoon with Minnie. “When I was about six years old, I remember going to a movie theater with Minnie,” said Phoebe. “The man at the theater told Minnie that I could sit downstairs at the movie, but Minnie had to sit upstairs. What did that mean? It was very confusing. I certainly wasn't going to go to the movies without her or sit in another place. We walked home in total silence, holding hands. I remember feeling really sad and not understanding.”

That's how Phoebe found out that many movie theaters at the time let only white people sit downstairs. Black people had to sit upstairs in the balcony. “It didn't make sense to me. I felt that the man who said that was mean.” Another day, Minnie took Phoebe to the city's amusement park. Phoebe could sit on a horse on the park's carousel, but Minnie wasn't allowed to ride with her. The carousel was only for white people.

Phoebe doesn't remember whether when she was a child she spoke with her mother about what had happened at the movie theater and the amusement park. She knows now that if she had spoken up, her mother would have said what happened was very wrong. Phoebe learned later that her mother had been volunteering with groups that tried to put an end to the idea of separating people by race. But Phoebe didn't know that when she was little. To young Phoebe, those movie theater and carousel rules were “definitely confusing and not fair.”

Also puzzling were the differences she saw between her house and the home of Minnie's aunt, Georgia Lee Kearny, who worked as a housekeeper for Phoebe's family. “I hung around Georgia a lot. I remember when I found out that she had to take three buses to get to our house. When I was older, around eight or nine, I went to her house and saw that after she finished working with us, she still had to go home and cook and clean for her family. I remember being deeply affected by the sacrifices Georgia was making in order to work for our family. I don't know why I went over there. I

was trying to make sense of the disparity between our living situations. I was also getting to know who she was outside of my house. Not that I needed to know anything more about her in terms of her integrity or her ability to give love to children that were not hers. But to see her interaction with her family and see that there were multiple relatives, nieces, nephews, and cousins that depended on her cooking for them as well. That affected me a lot.”

Both Phoebe Ferguson and Keith Plessy were born in New Orleans in 1957, but they never met while they were children. Phoebe’s father died when she was ten, and then she and her mother moved to California. Years later, Keith and Phoebe met when they were adults, with children of their own. By then, they had both learned something amazing: Sixty-five years before Keith and Phoebe were born, a member of each of their families had also met.

That meeting took place on October 13, 1892, when Phoebe’s great-great-grandfather was in a New Orleans court room with a cousin of Keith’s great-grandfather. Their being together in that courtroom had a lot to do with why there were rules and laws that kept Black and white people apart.

By the time Keith and Phoebe met as adults, they were both ready to create a new ending for the story that links their two families forever.

From pages 3- 9 :

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