Joe’s Article: Segregation (Bakaan inendamowaad)

February was black history month and I would like to talk about what it was like to live during the time of segregation. Upon graduating Onamia high school, I went into the Indian relocation act. The act that got native people off their reservations and into the working class of big cities. I moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and was trained to be a welder there. Shortly after completion of my training I found work with a construction company in the city. Unknown to me I was hired under the EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity), which meant companies had to integrate their work force with people of color (POC). AS I got started working at the company, there was no hate shown towards me from my light skin counterparts. I could see however; my other colored counterparts were not working as hard as I was. Further upon observing my light skin counterparts I could see their distain towards not only POC, but queer people. The bitterness and borderline hate that came out towards these groups of people that not only did we work with, but in life. I am unsure why I was not treated in such a similar manner. These light skin people would invite me to certain actives on occasion. For example, I was invited to go to church with these people and I would gladly go. When I’d go to the service I’d notice that these people were very dressed up, and the service people gave were something I could understand and how they treated not only each other but the buildings and grounds that belonged to them. Never while attending did, I feel uneasy. After service someone that I knew from work would typically would have a good old cookout filled with brats and beer. After a while I came to the conclusion that these are good people who work for their money, treated people right, and were religious people. Something that did strike me was that the use of these derogatory terms would come out more and more, and when they would they would use them, it wouldn’t be such a hard thing for them to say.

As time went on, I would hear them talk about us native people, the stereotyping that we were lazy, drunk, welfare ridden people. And when I looked back at home at the time, I indeed could see that these were some traits that fit many of our people. At the same time these people in the cities that were giving me a reason to almost look down at my race, it was almost becoming an issue. Another issue is that I became slightly detached from our own religion, or what people can call my “Indianness” because these sermons that were given at church made sense.

Jumping to 1965 when I joined the military I started to fight in Vietnam, while that was an experience of seeing all different kinds of pain and the horrible sights and understanding that war has no winners. One day we were walking along and saw these pamphlets on the road. So, we picked them up and began reading it and they were deliberately set by our enemy, the words within would try and sway the thoughts of the soldiers of color. “Why fight for a country that doesn’t care about you?” “you can’t even drink out of the same fountain as them”. That got me thinking about when I was younger and hearing about the racial discrimination in the south and all of the stories and protest that were happening even back then. When I finished reading those pamphlets it was like a lightbulb went off in my brain that I had begun buying into this mantra of my light skin co-workers. Various propaganda back home in the states at the time was all about “anti-war” and how it wasn’t right what we were sent over to do. All this combined made me question “where do I fit in here?” so started looking back and made me think I was okay within my place in life. I was a good worker and solider but where am I in this civil rights movement? I remember reading something in a book that talked about a sign that was posted just up in Cass Lake, MN years ago saying “Indians need not apply” and for the first time I thought “am I not equal to these people I work with??” the self-evaluating took a lot of time and energy. I thought “Am I okay with using these stereotypes?”

Then in 1971 I met a non-Indian lady, and we had become pretty good friends. We started as two very different people, one Anishinaabe searching for his identify and one non-native Catholic lady who was pretty set in her life and identity. In 1973 we decided to get married. If I do remember some of her relatives were uncomfortable with her marrying me, but we were at the point where it didn’t matter with what they said or felt. As said in previous articles I was struggling with alcohol then. Early on she would talk to me about life, and some of the things that we need to do so that we can achieve a good life together. At first, I did not listen to her probably because of my ego. Once I started to listen to her and the things she mentioned, everything made sense. Even though she was a very strong Catholic she understood our culture in a way that I needed, and the rest is history. From our marriage came six children, 26 grandchildren, and as of this past summer one great grandchild. I am forever in her debt for setting me on that path because without her I wouldn’t here today. Even though she has passed I know that she still watches over us.

Around the same time, we were married, I was dealing with the war trauma that I went through. And as has been told in prior articles that is when I started to get back into my spirituality. Speaking with the elders long ago about things made me realize I was really struggling. Not only was I struggling but I was learning about the oppression and struggles that we have been through as a people throughout history, something similar to how our POC friends went through. While visiting with these elders really made me “come to my senses” and that really was a pivotal movement that if I hadn’t done that, or taken that time I wouldn’t be where I am today.

One of the things that I learned from the Anishinaabe needs some backstory. When I worked for the construction company and other non-native people, they followed policy to the T. And I bought into the law and order but one day when I was working on the reservation, we had let go a native employee because of policy which was not followed by this person. When I did that, I heard one of the older people I worked with say “I heard they let her go” and another person said “yeah that’s the white man way” when confronting the group, I said “I hope that is not directed at me” they had nothing to say after I explained why we let her go. Realizing later on that we should have been helping this person instead of firing them and forcing them to move on. Just some of the lessons that I learned while working here on the reservations. So, I have lived in both ways so to say and am thankful the way we get to live as Anishinaabe. Miigwech, mii iw Indinawemaaganidog.