

My Friend and Mrs. Washington

By Juan Francisco Lara

My family and friends, the Church, and my teachers taught me many lessons. But two individuals taught me lessons that were not required or demanded by any conventional institution. If you know San Francisco, you know City Lights. I had Two City Lights. They illuminated my imagination and my spirit.

Like so many people who came to San Francisco during the Second World War, “Mrs. Washington,” the after school childcare teacher at John Muir Elementary School, and “My Friend,” a San Francisco Street Sweeper, stayed and made their livelihood in The City.

I am writing about the San Francisco of my childhood, when I was ten years old in 1953. This was one year before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the 1898 Plessy v. Ferguson Separate but Equal Legislation; five years after Jackie Robinson’s color changed to Brooklyn Dodger Blue, and President Harry Truman had desegregated the United States Military.

My neighborhood, Haight and Fillmore Street, was home to a collection of post-World War II communities. This was well before the glamour of the Hippie movement and Flower Power. During those years the Haight was a working class neighborhood where families paid the lowest rent and shared the highest density. Our families were the immigrant and ethnic poor that post WWII segregated to the Lower Haight near Fillmore Street.

In our homes we compared ourselves to one another, heard stories about the upper class status of our elders in the old country, no one was ever poor in the old country, and, in private, we learned about the ethnic, religious and marital boundaries between ourselves and Colored people, Krauts, Dagos, Limey’s, Mick’s, Japs, Chinamen, Polaks, Wetbacks, Greasers, Kikes, Russkie’s, Huns, Slavs and white Okies.

Mrs. Washington and "My Friend" were Colored or Negroes. My Mother made it clear that we should never say the “N” word even if we heard relatives use the word.

In their own generous way, “Mrs. Washington” and “My Friend” shared their kindness, and left an indelible impression on me that shaped my perspective as a 10-year-old and my future as an adult. Today, some 60 years later, I breathe life into them as I share their story.

Mrs. Washington had moved to San Francisco from the Deep South, so her husband could work in the shipyards during the War. I recall many an afternoon sitting in the school yard, listening to Mrs. Washington tell stories about what it was like to grow up in the segregated South and what it meant to have been born ‘Colored.’

“Johnny. Colored people had separate doors, toilets, water fountains and schools. Why would I want to go back there? You don’t know what you got here. Them folk hung colored people. “You were born lucky, Johnny,” she would say. “You gotta chance to get off of Haight & Fillmore and live somewhere nice.” According to Mrs. Washington, we all had a chance. “We won the War,” she would say. “Now go win your own war. You got talent, Johnny; work hard; you’re going places.” I often turned this thought over in my mind. Where would I go? This set me to daydreaming and wondering about my future?

My own Mother had married at 18, bore three kids by 21, and was a widow at 25. I was Mexican American. The English, Irish, Italians, and Jews in San Francisco had an accepted path for their journey. They ran the City and the professions. African Americans and Mexicans --what did life hold for us? “You got talent, Johnny; work hard; you’re going places. You don’t look Mexican. You broke the color barrier.” She nurtured my hope with a Graham cracker and a carton of milk.

By contrast, I never knew the name of a man that I called “My Friend” nor did he know mine. We simply called each other “My Friend.” He, like Mrs. Washington, had been raised in the South and stayed in San Francisco after the War. Each morning, my sister, brother, and I would begin our journey to school, some seven blocks away.

We timed our walk to coincide with the street sweeper’s route. In those days, they had a cart and a broom and they literally swept everything that had accumulated at the curb. If he were at the end of the block sweeping toward us, we would slow our pace so that we were sure to meet him. If he had passed us, we would run down the street after him.

He always invited us to look into a box, his Treasure Chest, suspended on the back of his cart. The items in the box inspired stories that I would create on the way to school. "Take one thing from the Treasure Chest," he would say. It was a trove of keys, bottle caps, washers, spark plugs, radiator caps, leather heels, buckles, and an seemingly endless assortment of objects. In return, we would offer him a vanilla wafer from our lunch bag.

After picking our treasure of the day, we would continue walking to school. I would then create a story, for example, about a leather heel, and where it had walked, or about a small brass key, and imagine - whose diary did it open? Little did "My Friend" know about the value of those items which became so significant to us as we made our way to school in the morning fog.

Mrs. Washington and My Friend never made the evening news. They passed away as anonymously as they appeared in The City. Their families could not afford an obituary in the San Francisco Chronicle. In my heart, I promised that someday I would tell their story. They are not anonymous: they lit my way. I thank them for showing me how people can connect at the most fundamental levels. They taught me about basic humanity, dignity and grace. Mrs. Washington and My Friend share life with me today. I will still nibble on a Graham Cracker and pick up an interesting object off the curb and imagine its life story.