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CORETTA SCOTT KING

Women For Diversity Award Winner



Judy Smith

by Mikell Worley

When I learned that Judy Smith was one of our Women for Diversity awardees, I was delighted at the opportunity to interview her. We first met in the late '90s at the Dauphin County RADAR office, then a central hub of community meetings, trainings, and resources to prevent the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. The last time I saw Judy in 2004 we were attending the Poverty Forum. Judy had just returned from taking the course "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," where she became certified to use the practices of Dr. Ruby K. Payne.

Since receiving certification, Judy has become a strong advocate for those in poverty and has devoted her energy to educating and empowering others in order to enable our children to have the greatest chance for success. She has embraced the works of Jonathon Kozel, world-renowned author on social injustices, and Dr. Donna Beegle, a highly experienced national public speaker for educators who work with people in poverty. In addition, Judy's mission has been to continually research poverty trends and social injustices in an effort to have an effective impact on our society.

"We live in a materialistic world and as a nation seem to care less and less about people. I am optimistic, however, that we will see a change and shift our priorities to more compassion for people than things." Judy is skilled at identifying teachable moments. She was at home due to an ice storm the day of our interview and was grateful to be able to work from there. "We don't always think about differences when there are dangerous road conditions. Those who have vehicles that easily navigate in icy conditions may not even consider that an employee may need to decide between food for their family and snow tires. Some have to walk to work in hazardous conditions, or change buses to get a child to daycare. If they lose a day of work it can be devastating. It's a domino effect."

Judy works as coordinator of family relations at the Milton Hershey School and facilitates the school's training on poverty. She is convinced that students need to understand, along with everyone else, that they are valuable. "Those who are economically disadvantaged frequently feel they don't have a voice. We need to talk about the injustice and assure them that they will not be labeled and dismissed because of economic factors."

Injustice and inequity were raging in 1966 when Judy left her hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana, to escape the race riots. "My dad was from a nearby town, Greencastle, Indiana, and we moved there thinking it would be less volatile. At the time, I was five years old and there were only three or four African Americans in my class. I didn't feel like I fit in with any group so, I became a loner. I didn't wear the right clothes or own the right things," she notes.

"It wasn't until years later that I found out how bad it had been and I was furious. My brothers played basketball and when they went to away games they had police escorts because of racial tensions. They

were not even allowed to go into restaurants and had to eat on the bus. I was furious! I asked my parents, 'How could you let that happen?' Now I realize that they were simply struggling to make ends meet and flying under the radar screen to avoid causing problems or drawing attention to themselves or their family."

Years later, while working in Middletown School District, she had an experience that made her view racial injustice from a different perspective. She worked with a Caucasian principal who was very supportive of Teen Talk program, Unity Week, and any program that promoted equality. He became frustrated at being called a racist after he tried to discipline a child in order to guide the student in the right direction. "At that moment I identified with what he was feeling. When I saw the pain in his eyes, I realized that we are all vulnerable to injustice. Diversity is each of us – all of us."

Judy also recognizes that we have more influence than we realize. She remembers once asking one of her son's friends what he would do when he graduated from high school. He was in eighth grade at the time and answered without hesitation, "I'm not graduating from high school. I'm just livin', Ms. Judy." Judy mentored him, among others. "He went on to not only graduate from high school, but also West Chester University." Since then he has worked on documenting poverty in New Mexico and Africa.

On a more personal level, she recalls the first time her son experienced discrimination based on his skin color. "As a parent we want our children to be respected and accepted. During his high school years he felt the stinging pain of injustice. That experience tainted and stained the heart of innocence, and it broke my heart. Later, when it came up again, I found myself giving this advice: 'Don't hate them. Remember that pain and use that to never, ever impose it on anyone else.' I don't know where those words came from. I do know it was my voice."

Years later Judy realized that voice came from within, rooted and sustained by her deep commitment to Christ. "I always admired Barbara Jordan, whose voice roared across a nation, against racism, sexism, and scores of societal evils to challenge the nation with a vision of truth and justice for humankind. I do not seek for my voice to roar on our nation's center stage like Jordan's. I will, however, use my voice to eradicate injustice down to its fundamental nature in my own small corner of this planet." ❖