

It's Time

Growing up as a kid in Jackson, Mississippi, I used to love to go to Ole Miss football games to watch my beloved Rebels play. Witnessing players like Archie Manning, Norris Weese, John Fourcade, and Buford Magee running all over the field was exciting. I can vividly remember the crowd cheering and waving their confederate flags when my childhood heroes would make a great play or score a touchdown. The whole spectacle of the event including listening to the band, watching the crowds wave their flags, and the team playing was exhilarating, uplifting, and contagious. Those great memories of fun, friends, family and football are something I will treasure and never forget! It was just a game to me.

It became more than a game when I went to Ole Miss. How I felt on Monday depended on whether the Rebels won or lost on Saturday. I also developed a relationship with my future wife during the many weekends we spent together at the ball games. It was a tradition to dress up and carry your flag to show your support for the team and our school. It became a source of pride for us to be unified as we battled teams from other states. We sang Dixie, waved our flags, and cheered for our team. We all felt great. We thought everyone from Mississippi felt that way. What's the big deal? We couldn't believe anyone would feel differently.

However, many people did feel differently. They saw the symbols of Ole Miss as symbols of racism and oppression. How could anyone be supportive of a confederate flag, the playing of Dixie, or a confederate soldier as its mascot? Were we racist? Were we mean spirited? Did we care about anyone else particularly African Americans? Why would we do such a terrible thing? They could not understand and we couldn't either. They had not been in our shoes as we viewed these symbols through a different lens. We saw those symbols as symbols of unity and fun. We did not know how it hurt others. We really didn't know much about civil rights. We did not know because many of us weren't around African Americans much. Yes, we saw black people but we didn't know black people. They did not go to our schools, our churches, or our homes. We were in one big bubble. We were ignorant about the plight they endured.

Then Chucky got hurt.

Chucky Mullins was a great defensive back from Alabama. He was scrappy, played hard, and had an infectious smile. Everybody loved him. We thought he would be the anchor of a tough defense until he broke his neck one Saturday against Vanderbilt. He would never be the same and we would never be the same. Chucky became the symbol of unity for the Ole Miss family. People raised money for him, wrote letters to him, and cheered him at every event. He tragically lost his life at too young of an age. A bust of him is placed at the entrance to the field at Vaught Hemingway stadium. Below the bust, the words "It's Time" are prominently displayed. We loved Chucky but his memories became distant. A statewide referendum on the flag was put on the ballot in the early 2003 but the current flag was reaffirmed. I voted to keep the flag because of my childhood memories. I voted for the flag because I didn't want outsiders attacking Mississippi. I was wrong but I didn't know it.

Nevertheless, a seed of change had been planted. Chancellor Robert Khayat took a bold move to basically get rid of the confederate flag at ball games by banning sticks. Chancellor Dr. Dan Jones stopped the playing of Dixie and changed the mascot. A concerted effort to increase the number of African American students was implemented and a statue of James Meredith was erected on campus. Rod Barnes was hired as the head basketball coach. Other schools in Mississippi also followed suit including Mississippi State by hiring Sylvester Croom as head football coach. University of Southern Mississippi hired Rodney Bennett as President. Traditionally all white private schools started to have black students enrolled. Educational institutions had taken the lead but the field of medicine would be quick to follow.

I also got to see others in a different light. My medical school class had many people from diverse backgrounds. I got to see how they felt when we talked about racial differences. I got to treat patients who came from really tough places. Even during my residency at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, I witnessed a white man from Tennessee tell a brilliant hematologist that he could not be his physician because he was black. I was stunned when this same physician used me as his tool to still help this man. What a testimony to professionalism! It is something that I will never forget.

I also was exposed to humble physicians here at home. Dr. Claude Brunson moved his way up through the ladder of academia leading the Anesthesia department at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. He later would become the first African American President of the Mississippi State Medical Association (MSMA). Dr. Rod Givens and Dr. Loretta Jackson were elected to the MSMA Board of Trustees and Dr. Roger Huey was elected to the board of Medical Assurance Company of Mississippi. Because of education and relationships, barriers have been knocked down and bridges are being built. To hear of their struggles toward success, I have developed a better understanding of what it must be like to be black. My mind has changed and I feel differently about what is the right thing to do.

Now back to the barrier of the state flag. Flags are supposed to be symbols of unity not signs of division. Just like any team, whether it is a sports team or a hospital team, we should understand what we are trying to accomplish. My belief is that we all want one goal, that is to be better. We want our citizens to have better. We want better education, better jobs, better healthcare, better services, better highways, and better government. As Mississippians, we want all of our patients and their families to have a better tomorrow than today. That can only be accomplished when we are unified. Just like when the Ole Miss family rallied around Chucky Mullins, I believe our state wants to rally around a unifying symbol. Not the current state flag, but a better flag. One flag that signifies future opportunities and hope. It would not be flag for some of us. It would be a flag for all of us. By passing legislation removing the current flag, the Legislature has given us an opportunity to look forward to making a new kind of history.

It's time.

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