Blacks Feel Decade Since King's

By LINDA S. WALLACE

Life has been like a revolving door for 58-year-old Mathew R. Davis who lives in the same house and holds the same job he did 10 years ago. He has worked hard on an assembly line at the Firestone Tire & Rubber Co., yet his dreams are just beyond his reach.

The intervening years have not brought about the changes Davis hoped and prayed for when he put his life and job on the line and joined the civil rights marches during the '60s.

"I don't live in a new house. And, I don't live in an integrated neighborhood," said Davis who lives at 1107 Argyle in North Memphis. "I have never been totally satisfied with where I live. And, I guess I don't have the fabulous home I would like to have, but it is comfortable."

In 1968, although never sharing in the limelight, Davis participated in nearly all the local marches and demonstrations.

The few rewards he has reaped since then have been intangible. And, although they haven't made it easier for him to feed and clothe his family, they have made it easier for him to live in peace with himself.

"I have the satisfaction of knowing that I did what was right. And, that makes it worth doing all over again."

The struggle to reach the "promised land" is far from over, say Davis and others questioned on the changes that have taken place in Memphis and in their lives since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. Fifteen black Memphians, representing a cross-section of incomes, political affliations, occupations and ages, were interviewed. They included a housewife, an owner of a radio station, a community relations manager for a motel chain, an elderly woman from North Memphis, a bank manager, a retired man involved in Republicans politics, a woman who is radio promotion manager, an advertising company supervisor, a maintenance worker and a church secretary.

They agreed on one point — the '70s have not fulfilled the expectations of the previous decade. Both rich and poor said changes in racial relations, housing and integration have been minimal. And, economic opportunities have improved for a few, rather than the majority.

The question of blame for this lack of progress prompted the only major division in the group. Some pointed the finger at the affluent blacks who have abandoned the city for suburbia, others at the black community which they say is not taking advantage of its new rights and responsibilities. Still others place the blame on the white community and its political leadership, which they say has not committed itself to the principles of integration and economic equality.

The question of guilt seemed unimportant to Davis, whose major concern is improving his life and that of his family. "I just don't see any great change . . . There have been some changes, and I think the relationships are better. But, you see, white people have got to understand that this is the way that it ought to be. And, black people, they have got to understand that if they were white, they would be accustomed to the way things were and it would be hard for them to change."

Blacks may have won self-respect over the past 10 years. But, many of the tough old problems remain, he said. "On the jobs, they still are not open like they should be. They will put a black in, but only as a token. They don't want to give them any authority."

Although life for Davis and his wife has changed little, life for their three children has improved. "They are all doing very well. I've helped put my three children through school. And they are why I demonstrated in the first place. I was on my way to Orange Mound with my son to see my sister one day and we passed by the fair. My son asked if he could go, and I knew that he would never get in the gate . . . I guess we did what we did (demonstrate) because of the children. We knew it had to be done."

The generation of young people like the Davis children, who were in high school or college in 1968, seemed to have had more success than their parents in breaking down the barriers.

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An example is 35-year-old Mark Stansbury, the director for community relations for Holiday Inn, Inc. Stansbury joined the company in 1969, a time when the company was attempting to integrate. He was hired, he believes, as a result the efforts by the civil rights groups.

"I have very definitely benefited from the civil rights movement," he said. "There are doors open to me that wouldn't have been open before."

Stansbury also was involved in the civil rights movements, but in a way different from most. He traveled the South reporting and taking pictures for various black publications. In the mid '60s, his big break came when he was hired as a reporter by The Commerical Appeal. From this job, he went on to become the public relations director for the predominantly black Lane College in Jackson, Tenn., before joining Holiday Inn.

Stansbury lives with his wife, Lucy, and

Death Hasn't Achieved Goals

their two children in a well-kept neighborhood in the Cherokee area, near Lamar and I-240. For him, that was a giant step from the M. H. Foote homes on South Lauderdale, where he was reared.

In 1969, when the Stansburys moved into the subdivision, priced from $35,000 to $85,000, it was predominantly white. Today, only black families live on their street.

"I wouldn't say Memphis is an integrated city. When we moved in the neighborhood, the real estate agents told us that the whites were not going to move out. But, one by one they have. And, now the area is predominantly black."

Even though Stansbury is a symbol of the positive changes spurred by the '60s, he said he is not content with the racial situation in Memphis."I do not think that we have progressed to the extent we should have . . . I have white acquaintances, and I have earned dignity and responsibility on the job, but they (co-workers) don't look to invite me into their homes . . . I go home to my world and they go home to theirs. We have made a few economic gains and social gains. We can live anywhere we want to in Memphis, but we still have not arrived at the economic salaries we should. There is still discrimination on the job."

Art Gilliam, owner of black-oriented radio station WLOK, agreed with Stansbury. The '60s was an era of social change, leaving the '70s to remedy the economic problems, he said.

"The struggle was a tremendous success in creating the legal environment so people could be free. But, I don't think that anything like parity has been achieved. The struggle didn't address itself to economical advances, only social. I don't think that it fulfilled the economic needs, that is what we are trying to deal with now."

Gilliam was just out of graduate school 10 years ago. He, too, has gained from the civil rights movement.

"If it had not been for the civil rights movement, WLOK would not have been a black radio station. Today, blacks can take advantage of those rights which are available to everybody. The quality of life for black Memphians and Americans in general has been improved by the civil rights movement."

However, he sees a new set of problems facing blacks.

" There are certain basic things that were being denied blacks back then that are not being denied now. The problems today are a little more sophisticated. They raise new questions. Once they are employed, are they going to have an equal chance to work their way up? Are the opportunities equal? And what about unemployment? A lot of young blacks are unemployed because the system is not working for them. They face the same problems as their parents did 10 years ago."

Gilliam said relations between black and white Memphians are poor.

"You can see it in the living patterns. Whites still tend to move out of a neighborhood when blacks move in. It is also evidenced in the unemployment pattern. Apartments are not equally available to blacks and whites here. It has been reported that some of them who let blacks in are segregating them in a certain area."

Rev. John Ferguson worries about those black youths who are unemployed. The 30-year-old maintenance worker at Shelby State Community College remembers the pains of growing up in a crackerbox house with his five brothers and sisters and his father who was a heavy drinker. His mother had died when he was young.

He was 20 years old when he was convicted of inciting a riot and sent to prison in 1969. Back then, he belonged to a militant youth group called the Invaders. When he got out of prison, he went back to hustling but later decided to straighten up and after a long search found his present job.

Ferguson, an assistant minister at Boston Baptist Church since December, said problems of unemployment, inadequate housing and discrimination are cutting into the self-respect of black people.

"In order to change the ways of people, you have to offer them something better. Well, no one has done that. Dr. (Martin Luther) King preached nonviolence against whites. Today, blacks are practicing violence against one another."

The 10 years following the death of Dr. King have broken the spirit of the black community, Ferguson said, adding that many blacks have lost sight of the goals and objectives they once cherished.

"We need to take a good look at ourself before we do anything. I think if Dr. King could come back, if he were able in some way to look down and see what was happening, he would probably weep . . . The '70s has showed us that he died in vain."

Mrs. Bertha Howard, a middle-aged supervisor for Southern Advertising Co., echoed that sentiment:

"I am really disappointed. Dr. King died for what he believed in — working for equal rights for everyone. But, I just feel like he died in vain."