

Sunday, February 3, 2008

**"I only regret that you didn't do this 10 years ago."**

Â Millions of people have been born in the United States long after lunch counter sit-ins were used as a fundamental part of the movement to end racial segregation. Everybody should know about the sit-ins. Sadly, of course, rampant racism and racial segregation continue in the United States, even though usually in more subtle ways than the in-your-face Jim Crow of the South. Â A sit-in that spawned many others was the February 1, 1960, sit-in at the lunch counter of the Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina. That same year, Robert M. Bell -- who now is the Â Chief Judge of Maryland's highest court -- was arrested and subsequently Â convicted for trespass in a Baltimore restaurant desegregation sit-in. Â The United States Supreme Court left it up to the Maryland courts Â to decide whether the intervening change in Maryland's sit-in/trespassing laws would dictate a different result. Unfortunately, the Maryland Court of Appeals said no. *Bell v. Maryland*, Â 236 Md. 356 (1964). Â On February 1, 2008, National Public Radio ran a very moving story of the Greensboro sit-in, including a current interview with Franklin McCain, who was one of the four sit-in participants. Mr. McCain recounts: "Fifteen seconds after [sitting at the lunch counter]â€¦ I had the most wonderful feeling. I had a feeling of liberation, restored manhood. I had a natural high. And I truly felt almost invincible. Mind you, [I was] just sitting on a dumb stool and not having asked for service yet." Â Â About an older white woman looking at the sit-in participants, Mr. McCain says: "And if you think Greensboro, N.C., 1960, a little old white lady who eyes you with that suspicious look â€¦ she's not having very good thoughts about you nor what you're doing." Â He was wrong. Â After the woman finished her coffee, she walked to McCain and fellow participant Joseph McNeil, and put her hands on their shoulders: "She said in a very calm voice, 'Boys, I am so proud of you. I only regret that you didn't do this 10 years ago.'" "What I learned from that little incident was â€¦ don't you ever, ever stereotype anybody in this life until you at least experience them and have the opportunity to talk to them. I'm even more cognizant of that today â€¦" situations like that â€¦" and I'm always open to people who speak differently, who look differently, and who come from different places." Smashing stereotypes is critical. Jon Katz. Â ADDENDUM: The transcript of this NPR story is here. The tape of the story is here. The Smithsonian's website discusses this sit-in here.

Posted by Jon Katz in Constitutional Law at 15:10