

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 Chief Judge of Maryland's highest court -- was arrested and subsequently convicted for trespass in a Baltimore restaurant desegregation sit-in. Â The United States Supreme Court left it up to the Maryland courts 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*, 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] 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 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 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 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" situations like that 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