‘Some of My Best Friends’ explores integration in America

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SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER


Born in 1968 in Richmond, Va., Vann Graves learned from his father (who had gone to jail for desegregating lunch counters and moved his family to a White neighborhood so that his children could attend a good public school) that he would have to “run faster, work harder and aim higher just to be considered average. You can’t make everything about race, even if it is.”

Throughout his career in advertising, Graves has embraced race as a blessing and a burden. On lily-white Madison Avenue, he experienced plenty of slights and affronts, including directives not to meet with a client, or make a pitch. On the other hand, some colleagues reached out to help and became friends.

“In this business,” he realized, “only networking with other African-Americans is like me networking with myself.” Last year Graves became the highest-ranking Black creative in the history of McCann Erickson.

Tracing ‘color line’ in four places

The “take-away,” according to Tanner Colby, is that although affirmative action has provided access to education and jobs, “real opportunity” (in a nation where Blacks constitute 11 percent of the population, earn 6.5 percent of personal income, and control 0.7 percent of total wealth) necessitates accumulating white social capital and “assimilating with the majority.”

In “Some of My Best Friends Are Black,” Colby, who has written biographies of comedians John Belushi and Chris Farley, traces the “color line” in four places he has lived and worked – a “white flight” high school in Birmingham, Ala.; a neighborhood in Kansas City fighting housing discrimination; advertising agencies; and a Catholic parish in Louisiana, contemplating the merger of a Black church and a White church – in an effort to understand “the mistakes that were made in trying to take it down.”

Colby’s case studies illuminate the lived experience of Blacks and Whites. He indicates, for example, that at Vestavia High School in the early ’90s all but two of the Black students (the daughter of a teacher and a superstar athlete) were bused in from Oxmoor.

Met with hostility and “tracked” into lower level classes, they gravitated to the Black table in the cafeteria – and middle-class Black parents turned to John Carroll, a Catholic school, and Ramsay, Birmingham’s public magnet school, which had a sufficiently large Black population to be “culturally comfortable.”

‘Squabbling over loose change’

Colby demonstrates as well that redlining and racial covenants kept Blacks from participating in the “suburban land grab,” a great engine of wealth creation. And that Martin Luther King, Jr. was right: 11 a.m. on Sunday, when the Holy Sabbath is celebrated, is the most segregated hour in the United States.

Solutions, however, aren’t easy to come by. Colby, at times, seems to have it both ways. He understands that separate institutions create “sanctuaries” and that Black churches exert “the strongest gravitational pull of all” because they provide something more important than jobs, money, and power.

He remains convinced, however, that “separatism begets separatism” and that Black businesses “are squabbling over loose change” and spending precious time demanding that government enforce affirmative action mandates that “keep them squabbling over loose change.” And he acknowledges, without elaborating, that “you can be authentically Black and still be assimilated.”

(Some of My Best Friends Are Black” is silent on politics and policies. Vestavia’s culture changed, Colby suggests, because White administrators and Black parents “decided to change it.”

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understand how the game was played and create opportunities for himself.

You can’t help hoping that Colby is right. But it’s hard not to wonder if that is all it will take.

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