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Industry Profile / Homer Floyd

Executive Director, Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, Harrisburg Office

By J Blair Brown

Homer Floyd has seen more than his share of racial discrimination and segregation. Born in 1936 in Wetumpka, Alabama, and raised in Massillon, Ohio, Homer experienced its devastating effects first hand: the hatred, injustice, and above all, the humiliation.

“When I was in college at Kansas University in ’57, our football team played a game in Fort Worth, TX. There were five Black players at that time, and the hotels were segregated, so we had to stay at the Black hotel, apart from the rest of the team.

“In those days, a lot of times when we’d go out to eat at some of the restaurants, we were made to either eat in the kitchen—away from the rest of the patrons—or take the food back to our rooms. At some of the movie theaters, we were made to sit in the balconies. Since I went through that hurt, the embarrassment, I wanted to pursue a life course to help lessen that impact on others,” he explains.

“We [the team] held a reunion a few months ago. At that event, many of our White teammates apologized for not speaking up and being more sensitive about what was happening at that time.”

Though there are a lot of negative memories of those tumultuous years during the civil rights movement, there are times, too, when Mr. Floyd looks back fondly. For instance, he reflects on the time when the Chancellor of the university, apparently taking a firm stand against discrimination, invited then-Chief Counsel for the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall, renowned for the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision, to speak at the university’s all-sports banquet.

“That meant a lot to us at that time (1957). That someone in his position would take a stand and invite such a well-known Black civil rights figure,” he recalls. “He [the Chancellor] knew what we experienced on the road, and was willing to transform this popular sports event into a civil rights banquet.”

Specially reflective is an occasion in 1968, when he held a position as the Director of Commission on Civil Rights with the Kansas Commission. He was privileged to meet and share a podium with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while Dr. King was a guest at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.

Some weeks later, Dr. King was assassinated.

Though several years have passed since the civil rights movement, Mr. Floyd never lost focus. For nearly four decades, he has served as Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, where he and his tireless colleagues investigate

approximately 9,000 discrimination complaints each year, out of three regional offices of the Commonwealth (located in Harrisburg, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh).

Since today's discriminators tend to be more sophisticated, and in most cases, less blatant, the work proves to be most challenging.

For instance, Mr. Floyd recalls of times, not too long ago, when apartment managers would simply tell minorities, who were seeking dwelling, that there were none available, despite numerous openings. And times when a realtor would schedule an appointment to show a home, only first to peek out of the window to get a look at the buyer. If the "look" of the potential buyer didn't appeal to the realtor, the realtor would lock himself in the restroom—or not answer the door at all. In these and many similar cases, the allegation of discrimination is fairly easy to prove.

Not so, these days. For example, today the average financial institution is expected to peer into one's credit history, work history, etc., prior to approving even the smallest of loans. But would an African American, or a woman's credit and work history be scrutinized more thoroughly? And if so, how are the allegations proven? Fortunately, Mr. Floyd and his colleagues are keenly aware of the various methods used to discriminate, and not only do they have the means to subdue it, they have the numbers to prove it.

Housing discrimination ranks second only to employment-related complaints lodged with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. And in 45-50 percent of the housing complaints, the cases are ruled as valid. Once proven, many of these allegations are settled to the satisfaction of both the plaintiff and the Commission.

Noble efforts such as eliminating discrimination are nothing new to Homer Floyd. In his other life, he enjoys volunteering with several agencies, many whose mission is to educate and promote awareness regarding discrimination. Just some of his responsibilities include serving as an active member of the International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies (IAOHRA), an agency dedicated to promoting civil and human rights around the world, and enforcing laws at all government levels; past President of the Boys' Club of Harrisburg (now the Boys' & Girls' Club), where he was directly involved in assisting hundreds of young boys in finding their life course. "It's always good to help out, but it's really nice when you see young ones who were going down a wrong road, and you've helped them to find the right course to take," he says.

In addition, he has served as a board member with the Pennsylvania Housing Advisory Committee; as Chair of the Central Pennsylvania Advisory Board to the United Negro College Fund; a former member of the Board of Directors of the Harrisburg Area YMCA; a life member of the NAACP, and many other fine organizations, too numerous to list.

As impressive as these are, this father of three and grandfather of two, has an even more significant role: that of dedicated husband to Mattie, his wife of over fifty years.

At sixty-nine years of age, this soft-spoken, dignified gentleman has no intentions of slowing down. For him, there will always be another struggle, another battle to wage. And he never stops promoting the good cause.

As we closed our conversation, he was adamant that this article mentions that the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission will celebrate its 50th anniversary on April 24th in Harrisburg. “Make sure that’s in there!”

Mr. Floyd, the pleasure’s all mine.