

## Things that [Truly] Matter

In the summer heat of 1966, racial tensions between African Americans and whites in Cleveland erupted into a riot that left four people dead, 30 critically injured, and 240 homes and businesses burned in the Hough community. In October, 1966, the Black Panthers, founded “to serve the needs of the oppressed people in our communities and defend them against their oppressors ([www.blackpanther.org](http://www.blackpanther.org)),” adopted their party platform and program. “What We Want & What We Believe” demanded housing, education, military exemption for black men, an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people, jury trials of blacks by their peers, release of all black prisoners, and the establishment of a black colony in the United States under the auspices of the United Nations that would empower black people to determine their own national destiny (<http://www.luminist.org>). Initially, the organization called for armed resistance to societal oppression. Subsequently, its focus shifted to the creation of community programs to address poverty and improve health.

The late Larry Slaughter was a Black Panther. I met him in the decade that followed the Hough riots in Cleveland at Myron T. Herrick Junior High School. He was a well-established presence in the building; I had recently arrived from an across town senior high school. He taught industrial arts; I taught English, but most importantly, we both taught children.

Within weeks of my arrival in the school, Mr. Slaughter confronted me and tried to dissuade me from making home visits in the neighborhood. I was determined to contact the parents of truant/disruptive students; he was equally determined that I would not

become a homicide statistic: white woman, age 32, murdered in black Cleveland neighborhood. So, we became the most unlikely duo in the quest for student attendance and achievement.

Dashiki clad, afro crowned Mr. Slaughter and strait-laced, straight-haired Ms. Goll set out in his Volkswagon in after school pursuits of students who needed special attention. Eyes peered behind blinds in neighbors' houses as we sat on the porch with one father who was waiting for his truant son to return home from school. When the child saw us sitting there, his steps slowed. His father greeted him, "Well, son, how was school?"

On another truancy visit, the family was gathered in their back yard where the father was scaling and filleting the perch he had caught earlier that afternoon. Larry pulled out his knife and before long, all of us sat down to a delicious fish supper and a discussion about the importance of a good education.

At the end of the school year, the Cleveland Teachers Union found that my transfer to the junior high school was an administrative mistake, and I was reassigned to my high school. Many years passed before I encountered Mr. Slaughter again at a workshop to counter student drug and alcohol abuse. Eyes widened as the Black Panther and the white lady enthusiastically hugged each other. Ears listened attentively as we recounted the "porch" and the "fish" stories and the changes in student attendance and behavior that followed.

Martin Luther King observed, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Words are important, but actions speak louder than words. Larry Slaughter and I took a stand . . . together. . . and made a difference, not based on race or gender, for our children and their futures...things that [truly] matter."

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Faculty Submission:

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