

## WAITING (AND WAITING) FOR JUSTICE

By Craig Lancaster

*Originally published in 2014 by Last Best News*

*Copyright © 2014, Craig Lancaster*

In 1986, when I was a junior at Richland High School in North Richland Hills, Texas, the local chapter of the NAACP came to my school with a request: It wanted us to drop the Confederate flag from our letterhead, our uniforms, the middle of our gym floor.

We reacted predictably. We had “Save the Flag” rallies. We printed up bumper stickers. We talked about heritage, not hate. We talked about how open and welcoming we were. And in the end, our local school board told the NAACP to go pound sand.

Nearly 30 years after those events, I’m sorry to say that I was among the fervor-filled partisans who resisted. In my narrowly developed worldview, I saw the NAACP as an outside agitator coming to take something from me and my classmates. *I wasn’t a racist. My friends weren’t racists.* In my view, someone had brought a fight by putting an unwanted and undeserved label on us. So we fought, and we won. We celebrated, and we went right on flying a symbol that celebrated Southern heritage—and reminded some folks of all that entails. It’s not just pecan pie and grits and the code words “states’ rights,” OK? You cannot fly that particular symbol without also giving air to generations of subjugation, to the ownership of human beings, to the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow and to George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door. At 16 years old, I couldn’t, or wouldn’t, make those connections because they weren’t visible to me in my suburban bubble. At 44, I’m repulsed by the logic that what I don’t see doesn’t exist.

When I consider the fight over a non-discrimination ordinance in Billings, I view it through that lens: Who’s fighting for equality and who’s fighting for the status quo, and what

side of that do I want to take? For all the talk of bathrooms and the freedom to bake a cake with full religious conviction and the ills of moral turpitude, in the end a simple calculus emerges. A nondiscrimination ordinance says that in our town, basic human dignities—the right to seek employment, to find housing, and to receive accommodation in the public square—belong to us all. The refusal to pass one says that those who would deny others such things are free to exercise that discretion. And that should be unacceptable to all of us, for if we're willing to deny those things, overtly or implicitly, what else will we throw away?

Richland High School dropped the Confederate flag in 1996, a full 10 years after my classmates and I beat back the NAACP's challenge. The world has gone on spinning, and in one little corner of it, things are bit more inclusive\*. The loss of a flag alone didn't do that, of course, but I have to think it sent a message: We're better when we're all welcome.

An NDO carries a powerful message, too. I don't want to get to 54 years old and still be waiting for it.

*\*—but still a long way from where they need to be, as recent events have demonstrated all too clearly. (Addendum, June 6, 2020).*