



Ann Summerford-Fielder, right, of Syracuse, was among activists who greeted visitors from Selma, Ala., who came to Syracuse in 1965 to join protests against Niagara Mohawk's hiring practices. Civil rights activists at the time argued that it was nearly impossible for blacks to get decent jobs in Syracuse. They rallied against Niagara Mohawk, which had only five blacks among its 1,500 employees in the region. (Photo courtesy of the OHA)

STILL STRUGGLING IN SYRACUSE

50 YEARS AFTER THEY MARCHED FOR RACIAL JUSTICE, MUCH HAS IMPROVED — BUT SUFFERING REMAINS

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Sure, Dolores Morgan Brule was feeling it. At 84, she and Marshall Nelson, an old friend, were greeted a few weeks ago in the main lobby of National Grid headquarters by Melanie Littlejohn, the power company's regional executive director. Littlejohn led them around a couple of corners, and invited them to take a seat:

In the splendor of the old Niagara Mohawk boardroom.

"This is a picture," Brule said, "of how this community has changed."

Just not enough, she said. Not close to enough.

Brule remembers protesting in front of the building, a half-century ago. She remembers a silent police officer at the door, a man who'd snap photographs of every demonstrator, of every face he saw pass by.

Brule and Nelson, 79, are African-American — as is Littlejohn, National Grid's top official in Syracuse. In 1965, her status would have seemed impossible. Littlejohn described Brule and Nelson as two of her heroes, "these two giants I sit between."

Fifty years ago, her company's predecessor, Niagara Mohawk, was the nerve center for a tense struggle. The

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a prominent civil rights group, identified the company as especially blatant in excluding blacks when hiring.

In the early 1960s, a time of great change in the city, CORE argued Syracuse was rife with unspoken racism, such as housing practices that locked black families displaced by demolition of the old 15th Ward into struggling neighborhoods and projects.

Equally suffocating for the black community, CORE argued, was the near-impossibility of landing decent jobs with too many established companies. Niagara Mohawk, which had only five black employees among 1,500, seemed particularly egregious. The company responded that few blacks were qualified for hiring.

"We were always sending them our money," said Gladys Smith, 79, a retired nurse who took part in the protests, "but they refused to hire any of our people."

The situation came to a boil after dozens of Syracuse ministers, priests and activists went to Selma and joined the march for voting rights in Alabama, led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In Syracuse, many residents felt it was equally important to challenge conditions here, where you could still find some businesses that wouldn't serve people of color, where it was difficult for blacks to rent or buy a home in "white" neighborhoods. ...

And where you could just about forget working at a place like NiMo.



In front of the Niagara Mohawk, now National Grid, building on Erie Boulevard West in Syracuse, are, seated, Marshall Nelson and Dolores Brule, who protested against the company's hiring practices in 1965, and, standing, Melanie Littlejohn, National Grid's regional executive director. (Michael Greenlar / mgreenlar@syracuse.com)

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Inequality lingers, 50 years later

INEQUALITY, FROM PAGE E-1

Liz Page, now a retired social worker in the city schools, was an undergraduate at Syracuse University when she took part in the demonstrations. She learned of CORE from George Wiley, an SU professor inspired by James Farmer, leader of the movement.

Page recalls how some customers paid their NiMo bills in pennies, as part of the larger protests. Nelson has especially powerful memories of a march in April. Roger Knapp, a young protester, had been arrested and jailed in the Public Safety Building, charged with interfering with the duties of a police officer, an arrest that generated fierce community debate.

Nelson was a protege of Monsignor Charles Brady, a white priest who — as a chaplain in World War II — witnessed the humiliation of black soldiers in a segregated Army. Monsignor Charles Fahey, 82, a close friend, said Brady came home infuriated about entrenched American racism, about the tendency to accept the suffering of the poor.

"If he saw someone without a coat or shoes," said Nelson, "he'd stop and give them his."

Brady was active in the Catholic Interracial Council in Syracuse. Retired Auxiliary Bishop Tom Costello, who traveled with a Brady-led group to Selma, recalled how the monsignor held a passionate meeting on Good Friday, 1965. He asked those who'd gone to Alabama to join him in marching on NiMo and challenging its policies.

The opinion of the larger community seemed overwhelmingly against the marchers. On its editorial page, The Post-Standard routinely ripped CORE and the protesters, describing them with such terms as "racial showoffs."

Only a few of those who went to Selma — including Jerry Berrigan, the renowned activist who died in July, at 95 — chose to walk at Brady's side.

"I was chicken-hearted," said Costello, who would become a voice of conscience on many issues in Syracuse over the years. It was easier to put himself on the line in Selma, he said, "because no one knew me there."

He often speaks of how he wishes he had gone with Brady, whom he describes as "a hero, a saint, someone always willing to stand up for his convictions." Fahey, too, declined to walk and now wishes he did.

"We all learn," Fahey said.

Famed writer Gay Talese, in The New York Times, made note of how so many from Syracuse, who walked in Selma, declined to march in their own town. But Nelson took part, with many others. He remembers a string of protests, that year, led to many arrests: There were demonstrators who refused to leave NiMo's lobby after business hours, demonstrators who chained themselves to cars in the street.

Brule recalls jumping up in frustration at an



Twenty-one freedom marchers from Selma, Ala., join hundreds of others to march from the Greyhound bus terminal in Syracuse to Clinton Square for a rally. Protesters said the city was not providing good housing and schools and that Niagara Mohawk discriminated against black job applicants.
(The Post-Standard, May 5, 1965)

Urban League meeting when she felt the organization was not being forceful enough, and walking outside to join the protest.

NiMo eventually agreed to rethink its hiring policies. One major change was hiring Nelson as a personnel supervisor, with an emphasis on finding skilled African-American and women employees. He became a legend at the company, where officials say women and blacks now make up about 25 percent of the work force.

In 1994, David Arrington — the first African-American at NiMo to serve as a senior vice president — decided to hire a young woman raised in New York City who'd been working for the Urban League:

Melanie Littlejohn.
She is now the company's top official in Central New York. A few weeks ago, she hugged Nelson and said her achievements happened because of him and others who stood up for their beliefs.

"This is why I work so hard," she said. "This is why I do what I do."

She points to National Grid's involvement in many programs — including a scholarship in Nelson's honor, or an effort to encourage young engineers of color, or a "summit" Tuesday in Syracuse for diverse service suppliers — and says her company is trying to strengthen its bond with the black community. She said change is especially evident at Grid's leadership tier, and that one of her central goals is creating opportunities for children of the city.

Part of that imperative, she said, is making sure young people understand just how much others put on the line for them.

So yes: It was moving for Nelson, and for Brule, to sit with an African-American CEO at National Grid, whose president of American operations, Dean Seavers, is also black. In Syracuse, the old warriors of civil rights speak of Littlejohn with admiration.

"She worked hard for everything she's got," Smith said, "and she's not one of these people who forgets where she comes from."

As for the battles fought 50 years ago? In the voices of Nelson and Brule, of Smith, Page, and Charlie Goldsmith, a CORE leader in the 1960s, you hear frustration and deep sadness.

Recent studies say Syracuse has the nation's highest concentrations of extreme African-American and Latino poverty, and that half our children in the city are growing up in those conditions. Another study indicates Syracuse is the ninth most segregated city in the nation, with the majority of black and Latino citizens locked into a few impoverished neighborhoods.

That is the hardly the future envisioned by King — who in a Syracuse speech, in 1965, warned of the generational damage caused by racially segregated schools — or by marchers who risked arrest, outside of NiMo. Page, the retired social worker, said it is heartbreaking to think that so many city children, wounded by the circumstances surrounding them, face steep odds of achieving peaceful, secure lives.

She finds it maddening, she said, whenever she sees construction crews in the heart of the city that lack workers of color, even as those crews repair public bridges or roads. Last week, in an echo of the picket lines of the 1960s, a group called the Urban Jobs Task Force called on City Hall to mandate that any contractors doing city work in Syracuse must hire a significant number of city residents.

"There are changes, I'll give you that," Page said. "But they haven't hit (those) who can really use that change." She said the struggle has shifted form. The obstacles are "more insidious."

In 1965, the response for many in Syracuse: You march on power. Fifty years later, the question is how to generate transformation in a city where some things are much better, but where all too much suffering remains the same.

To Brule, the answer is obvious: The cascading poverty, inequity, addiction and bloodshed on city streets scream for an immediate alliance of every major business, organization and civic government in greater Syracuse — joined by the schools, the colleges, the churches, the civic groups — to collectively adopt a strategy. With urgency.

"There's a lot to do, and we need to sit together — everyone, all our institutions — and work on it," Brule said. "And we need to work together, forcefully."