

The Answer to the "Negro Problem"

by ROGER WILLIAM RIIS



WHAT IF HE WAS a veteran? What if he was young and physically fit? What if he had a service decoration from the war and, back of that, a university engineering degree? Corporations were clamoring for men with just his abilities. But—he was a Negro.

For months he had answered want ads and pounded pavements. Everywhere he met refusals, some polite, some harsh. Then at last he wandered into the office of the Cleveland Urban League.

With the backing of this outpost of a great national organization, he was able to take a competitive examination for an engineering job with the local transit company. The only Negro entrant, he made the highest grade of all—98.2—and landed the job. Three months later, he got his first promotion.

You can call this a single instance of a single person. Or you can see it as one of thousands of instances in which obstructions have been cleared away, ability has been given an open channel to follow, and community and national interests have been served.

At one time during the recent war, our efforts in the Pacific ran into a menacing threat. In Guam, in Honolulu, in San Francisco, race riots in the Navy were imminent. Here was the danger of real trouble, which the Japanese would have welcomed gleefully.

Acting quickly, Secretary of the Navy Forrestal called to Washington the executive secretary of the National Urban League, Lester B. Granger, a Negro. After earnest

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discussion, Forrestal made history: he gave Granger a sweeping commission as his personal representative, and put a Navy plane, crew and escort at his disposal.

With Harry McAlpin, Negro newspaper editor, and Matthew Bullock, Negro attorney, Granger flew 60,000 miles and visited 100,000 Negroes stationed in the U. S. and at posts throughout the Pacific; there were two tangible results. When Granger got back to Pearl Harbor, the commanding officer greeted him warmly.

"Glad to have you aboard!" he said. "It's been a different ship since you came the first time."

And when Granger got back to Washington, the President gave him the Medal for Merit, highest of civilian honors. Few individuals during the war had made a greater contribution to victory.

THESE STORIES ARE typical of the quiet, healing work of the least-publicized and oldest organization in the field of Negro-white relations. "American Teamwork Works!" is the slogan of the National Urban League. Serving this ideal, it has grown from a pioneer committee in 1906 to a giant organization with autonomous, locally financed Leagues in 57 cities, putting a total of more than \$1,250,000 annually into the efforts of 230 professional staff members.

Today, the Leagues serving the largest number of Negroes are in Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago, Pittsburgh and New York.

The handful of men and women of the 1906 group—the Committee for Improving the Industrial Conditions of Negroes—took permanent form four years later under the leadership of Mrs. Ruth Standish Baldwin. But today, more than 3,000 citizens, white and Negro, leaders in their communities, direct the work of the League boards.

In New York headquarters at 1133 Broadway, 35 full-time workers carry on the complicated functions of leadership in a field where leadership demands firmness, tact, tolerance and understanding on the one hand, and unswerving allegiance to a cause on the other.

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The League never thinks of itself as a “Negro organization,” or as an organization working on the “Negro problem.” It represents the best interests of Americans, white and Negro, liberal and conservative, labor and management.

The great secret which the League uses is this: when people work side by side on a project which matters to them, they forget the color of the next man’s skin. A white carpenter in Indianapolis noted this with surprise. “Five minutes after I started sandpapering beside Joe, his arms and mine had become the same color—the grayish color of sandpaper dust. It was the color of the job.”

Therefore, the League believes that the more numerous and diverse the opportunities for the two races to work together, the more easily does friction vanish. That is why the League has registered innumerable advances everywhere. In 1947, it placed 35,536 Negro workers in jobs. And for the first time, 1,052 employers used Negro workers.

The American public remembers the recent school strike in Gary, Indiana. Back of it was the real-estate interest of adults who feared Negro infiltration into their district. Eagerly the children seized upon the idea of staying home from school “because of Negroes in classes.” Feeling rose high, and the situation became touchy.

The League was early on the job. Avoiding publicity, making no embittering statements, compiling data not on Negro education but on community education, not on Negro health but on community health, the League soothed hot tempers and drew civic organizations together in pride of the city’s good name. To the new idea, men and women rallied—the ministers, the union leaders, the publisher and staff of the *Gary Post-Tribune*, the Chamber of Commerce. Instead of race riots, Gary had peace.

Knowing that prevention is far better than cure, the League’s ambassadors last year visited 111 cities, not as “do-gooders” but as trained social experts. In many cases they were pursuing the Community Re-

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lations Project which the Rockefeller General Education Board financed with \$110,000. In 13 cities, South and North, they set up comprehensive programs for community teamwork.

In Columbus, civic leaders were disturbed over the large number of Negroes coming into police courts. Ninety per cent of them were newcomers to town, strangers to urban life. So the League created the Friendly Service Bureau. The city fathers said it was “phenomenally successful,” and made it a permanent department of the police bureau. The Negro crime rate dropped 50 per cent. Police of 41 other cities have copied the Columbus method.

Probably no achievement is brighter than Sydenham Hospital in New York, governed and staffed by a wholly interracial personnel, dispensing healing to all. When the hospital recently faced financial straits, the people of Manhattan poured in dollars to keep the institution active.

A hospital in Tampa, Florida, is another instance. Weary of inferior, second-rate facilities, the League there spearheaded the drive to raise \$200,000 to build a hospital of 66 beds and manned it with an all-Negro staff of 41.

In Atlanta, a study by the League revealed that there was one school for every 860 white children, and one school for every 2,000 Negro children. There were no picket lines, no denunciations—simply facts. Result: the appropriation for Negro schools was raised from one to four million dollars.

In Elizabeth, New Jersey, a new playground; in Phoenix, Arizona, a barbers’ college; in Springfield, Illinois, the Carver Trade School; in Minneapolis, the Human Relations Council led by the churches; in Chicago, the South Central Association and the Principals’ Luncheon Group, two interracial civic organizations—all these created by the League.

Fort Worth, Texas, is proud of its Carver Health

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Center, treating 3,000 children a year; Lincoln, Nebraska, of its annual Back-yard Cleanup Contest which has brightened 90 per cent of the dismal yards; Buffalo, of the Board of Community Relations, so good that it has become a regular part of the city government; Providence, of its voluntary Fair Employment Practice Committee.

“These people,” says Edgar Ray, managing editor of the *Tampa Times*, “are doers, not protesters. They are opening long-closed minds. Their work should be measured by the hearts and consciences it has touched.”

In recent years, the League's vocational experts have been busy. In Flint, Michigan, the first Negro schoolteachers; in Gary, two Negro doctors in the top hospital; in Minneapolis, teachers, bakers, draftsmen; in Grand Rapids, a registered pharmacist; in two score cities, telephone operators and technicians; in dozens of other cities, salesgirls in department stores. And with every job, a new door opened in the field of good will.

HAS THERE NEVER BEEN a failure? Yes, in a short-range sense. The League has been rebuffed before it could start in one or two cities. In others, it has begun with personnel not big enough for the job, and then work has lagged until the national office in New York could take corrective action. But in long-range terms, the League does not admit to permanent failure. If it stumbles today, it advances confidently tomorrow.

The League's secretary, Lester Granger, is an outstanding citizen. His father was a Negro physician, his mother a Negro schoolteacher. Lester was one of six sons: four were graduated from Dartmouth, two from the University of Pennsylvania; all but Lester went successfully into medicine. Dartmouth, proud of her Granger alumni, recently gave Lester the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

Granger is backed by a board headed by Lloyd K. Garrison, great-grandson of the famous Abolitionist, and by active committee

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members like William Green, Joe Louis, Philip Murray, Langston Hughes, Mary McLeod Bethune, Pearl Buck and Bruce Barton.

Clearest symbol of the League is its Two Friends Award. This goes to the outstanding instance in which a white and a Negro, working together as friends, create something of distinct value to the community. The 1948 Award went to Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson, whose friendship has made Brooklyn baseball fans happy.

There are, the League knows, two ways of “establishing the rights” of minorities. One is by mass meeting, picket line and clamor for laws. But this may stiffen opposition, sharpen hostilities. The League prefers to hold out the hand of friendship. This is slow, but it builds and grows.

Elder statesman in this field, Eugene K. Jones, the League’s executive secretary for 30 years, sees the advances that Americans have achieved. Still active in the League, Jones is refreshingly optimistic.

“Looking forward, it’s a long, long road. But take a look backward, and you’ll see that we have come a long, long way toward American teamwork!”



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