# You've Been Well Cared For

written by Betty Reid Mandell | May 27, 2010

I WAS SITTING IN THE HOMELESS UNIT of the Grove Hall Department of Transitional Assistance (welfare department) chatting with some women. One was living in a homeless shelter in Saugus, a town on the north shore of Massachusetts; the other was applying for shelter. They were ashamed to be here. They said that they had worked and held responsible jobs. Life had dealt them raw blows. One had to leave her job because of an injury to her spine that seemed to require endless treatment, and she did not know when she could return to work. The other had various medical problems. She was infuriated because the DTA worker was "jerking her around." She had an appointment for 9, and it was now 11 and they still hadn't seen her.

They cared deeply about their children. The woman who lived in Saugus was driving her daughter to Boston every day so the child would not have to switch schools. I told her that a recent federal law requires the home school district to provide transportation from the shelter to the child's home school. I pointed to the sign on the wall that told about this and urged her to call the number.

The woman who was being "jerked around" said in a resigned voice, "It's all downhill when you get old. I'm 45 and I don't think things will get any better." I protested, "Come on, I'm 78 and I'm not going downhill. I'm still here fighting." The women were amazed. "You're 78?" they said. "You've been well cared for. We've been battered around all our lives."

I've been thinking about that a lot. I think the women were implying that I had been treated better in life because I am white, while prejudice and discrimination against African-Americans had given them harsher treatment than I had faced. Was that true?

As a child, I didn't feel privileged. My father was one of the last homesteaders to get free land from the government, but he got the worst land — dry land in the prairies of Colorado where it seldom rained and the dust storms were so fierce that you literally couldn't see your hand in front of your face if you were outside, while the wind whipped sand through the cracks of the windows and doors. On a freezing winter day the car broke down coming home from the school, which was seven miles away, and we froze our fingers and toes walking home for two miles.

My parents lived in constant dread of the bank foreclosing on the mortgage, and one day they held an auction to sell off cattle and machinery so they could pay the mortgage. We were eager to watch the auction, but my parents made us go to school so we would not witness their humiliation.

Still, we kept the farm and somehow all four of us children went to a public college where the tuition was cheap. My sister and I raised and sold prize 4-H steers and saved the money for college. I pumped gas at a filling station during World War II, helped with bookkeeping at the gas station, typed letters for a local cattle rancher, and when I went to college, had a work-study job and a scholarship. I paid for my graduate school by part-time secretarial jobs and stints as a group work leader at the YMHA and Community Church in New York City. I didn't mind working, even enjoyed much of it, but I never felt that I had a privileged life.

YET AS I THOUGHT ABOUT IT, I did get better breaks in life because of my white skin. When I read the history of the Homesteading Act, I learned that African-Americans were discriminated against and didn't get even the poor land that my father got.

The Mexican-American children whose family came to town to pick sugar beets attended my school, but they had to leave because their family moved on to other migratory work when the beets were pulled. My family were permanent residents and I could stay in school.

When I went to Grange Hall dances, I noticed that the two sons of the only African-American farmer in our neighborhood stood on the sidelines and never asked any of the white girls to dance. I would have been shocked if they had asked me to dance, but I think I would have been pleased too, because they were handsome and I had secretly wanted to get to know them. An unwritten community prejudice had kept us from getting to know one another. That was not privilege for me, since it kept me from living as full a life as I could have.

At college I joined a sorority that I later discovered did not allow African-Americans to become members. I tried to resign, but was told that no one was allowed to resign. Their racism was mandatory!

The parents of one of my best friends in college were living in a Japanese-American concentration camp, having been put there during World War II. I gave speeches against the injustice, and I knew that my parents were never under suspicion of being spies because their skins were white.

I taught at a state college and since I retired I have lived on my state pension, as well as Social Security. Many African-Americans weren't covered by Social Security because it did not cover domestic workers or agricultural workers for many years. Even when they were covered, they often received less money because the work had paid so little.

I have had health problems too, but the state health benefit, combined with Medicare, pays for almost all of my medical care and I can choose any health care provider I wish. I can get two, and even three, opinions before I undergo surgery. I know that I am privileged in this compared to Medicaid recipients, who have a limited choice of doctors and cannot get all the services they need, and compared to people who work in low-wage jobs that don't provide health insurance.

So yes, I have been privileged. Those women in the DTA office asked why I came to the office and did this kind of work. I told them that I had been a social work professor at Bridgewater State, and I believed in not only talking about my knowledge and beliefs, but acting on them. They commended me and said that it was good to stay active and involved. "It's sure better than sitting on the couch and clicking the remote."

I agreed. I am privileged to be able to use my knowledge to come to the DTA office and tell a homeless woman that she does not have to drive her child twenty miles to school and back every day, and that the school system is breaking the law if they don't pick the child up. I am privileged to know enough to go into a fair hearing with a woman and point out to the worker and the hearing officer that they are breaking the law by cutting off the woman's welfare benefits. I am privileged to help a woman apply for food stamps. And I am privileged to know the brave mothers who come to the DTA and keep their spirits up for the sake of their children.

## Footnotes