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REUNION DEPT.

CIVILITY

BY REBECCA MEAD

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MULTIMEDIA: HEROES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

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by Rebecca Mead

MARCH 8, 2010

Until last month, Joseph Charles Jones, a lawyer in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Judge George Bundy Smith, Sr., a former justice of the New York State Court of Appeals, had not seen each other since May, 1961, when they were both arrested in Montgomery, Alabama. The men had been thrown together as Freedom Riders: civil-rights activists who sought to challenge Jim Crow travel policies in the South. Their reunion, which took place at Chez Lola, a restaurant in Fort Greene, was set up by Charlotta Janssen, an artist who has done a series of paintings inspired by police mug shots of Freedom Riders, a show of which was opening at John Jay College of Criminal Justice the following evening. Janssen, who is of German and Swedish extraction—and who is the co-owner of Chez Lola—seemed dazzled by the presence of the septuagenarians whose youthful visages she had incorporated into her work. “I’d spent hours with both of you before I met you!” she said to Judge Smith, gazing at him over a platter of chilled oysters. “It’s amazing to see your mouth move.”

Jones, who said that his lawyering these days consists of drawing up wills and persuading the occasional drug dealer to accept a plea bargain, and whose business card advertises his availability for night and weekend appointments, was folksy and loquacious, never using one word where ten, preferably strung together in rhyme, would do. (Of his walk from a nearby bed-and-breakfast, he said, “I saw Brooklyn stand tall, and teach the youth about it all, so that now they come to understand that it’s a neighborhood of different cultures that makes the garden grand.”) He was self-deprecating—referring to himself as a “poor sinner”—and greeted female guests with a hug and an exhortation to “give me some love, woman.” At the time of his arrest, Jones had recently graduated from Johnson

C. Smith University, in Charlotte, and as he recalled the event—which came only a few days after another group of Freedom Riders, including the future congressman John Lewis, had been savagely beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan—his eyes filled with tears. “We got on the bus, we went further south, and the crowds of angry white folk started to get bigger and bigger,” he said. “I heard my grandma’s spirit say, ‘You’re God’s child; you’re as good as any of them.’ ”

Smith, who at the time of the Freedom Ride was a second-year student at Yale Law School, and is now a partner at the firm of Chadbourne & Parke, was, by contrast, sober and restrained. He provided an unemotional account of the events of May, 1961, complete with legal citations for the group’s conviction by an Alabama court—they were charged with breach of the peace and unlawful assembly—and the ultimate reversal of their conviction by the U.S. Supreme Court, in 1965 (*Abernathy v. State of Alabama*). “I just thought that things were so bad it could not continue without some effort being made to change it,” he said. He also said that he had not feared the possibility of compromising a future legal career. “When I became a member of the New York State Bar, I was still a convict facing thirty days in jail,” he said. “I went through the character committee. I had not killed anybody, and I had not committed robbery, so I was not really worried.”

Seated next to each other for the first time in nearly fifty years, the two civil-rights veterans were civil, all right; but they did not appear to feel the need to make up for lost time, beyond exchanging notes on their offspring—Jones has six (“three from my own body and three from my wife”), and Smith has two—and other fragments of information (“You live in Harlem? Bless you, my brother—not that you need my blessing”). Smith polished off his paella swiftly—“I talk slowly, I move slowly, and I drink slowly, but I eat fast,” he said—while Jones’s red snapper grew cold on his plate. “Charles, get some nourishment,” Monica Williams, a theatre director from the neighborhood, urged. “The spiritual nourishment of your face nourishes the place that food cannot go,” he replied.

When Smith was asked if Jones had talked as much on the bus to Montgomery, he said, “I was so caught up with my law books, I can’t remember.” With snow falling outside, the Judge made his excuses and left, first offering a cordial handshake to his former jail-mate. Jones, lingering over chocolate cake and anecdote, reflected on the encounter. “I’m a feely, touchy person, and that turns him off, but that’s O.K.,” he said. “But fifty years later, underneath all of that, we feel so close and so blessed.” ♦

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