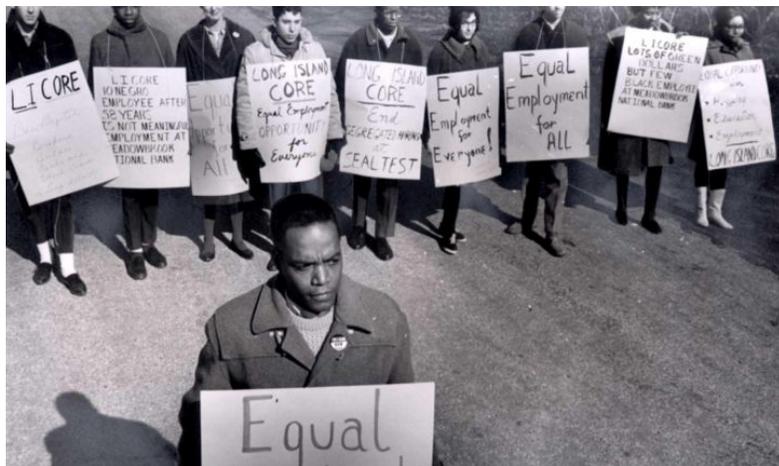


LONG ISLAND / HISTORY

'The Movement' for equality



Lincoln Lynch, the Long Island chair of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), leads the way up Hillman Street in West Hempstead with members of the organization behind him. The march called for more jobs for minorities at local employers such as Sealtest Dairy and Meadowbrook National Bank. Credit: Newsday/Marvin Sussman

By Joye Brown

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One hundred years after Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, a black man, also named Lincoln, walked to a podium at the Garden City Hotel. He was there, on the first day of January, 1963, the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, to receive an award from the NAACP.

Lincoln O. Lynch, clean cut and conservatively dressed, carried several handwritten sheets of notebook paper and placed them gently on the stand. When the polite applause died down, the recently appointed chairman of the Long Island branch of the Congress of Racial Equality looked out over the audience of almost 1,000, most of them black Long Islanders, and began to speak.

It was not what his audience expected.

"Here in Nassau County," Lynch began, "and indeed in the very Village of Garden City in which we now meet, racial discrimination and segregation cry out loud for correction.

"All over Nassau, from Inwood to Oyster Bay, from Glen Cove and Manhasset and Port Washington, on our supposedly fabulous North Shore, to Freeport and Farmingdale and Roosevelt and across the border into

Amityville, there exists shameless evidence of undisguised discrimination . . . "

His conclusion left many in the audience stunned: "The largest portion of the blame for this situation must be laid, squarely, at the door of the Negro himself, especially so of those who claim to have achieved middle-class status." Black suburbanites, he said, were engaging in a "mad scramble to attain middle-class status and to acquire the trappings of false values dictated by the same society which holds him in contempt." Worse, he said, they seemed to have forgotten that "no Negro can attain freedom until all Negroes attain freedom."

Until then, polite protest had typified the civil rights movement on Long Island. Now Lynch was advocating direct action and defiance. He issued a call to arms, urging black Long Islanders to "prepare and finance lawsuits, badger elected officials for legislation, to picket or sit in or boycott, if necessary, to win equal rights."

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In the next several months, many would heed his call. Lynch would become a catalyst, spurring on a coalition of individuals and organizations that crossed racial, economic and geographic lines. Across Long Island, CORE, the NAACP and a host of local activists would work together and separately, picketing and protesting, suing and negotiating for equal access to housing, jobs and schools.

"Before Lincoln, things were pretty quiet," Thomas A. Johnson, who was hired as Newsday's first black reporter a few months after the speech, said recently. "Lincoln brought things to the foreground."

With Lynch's call to activism, civil rights groups battled publicly and aggressively for school desegregation, good housing for migrant workers, an end to urban renewal's destruction of black neighborhoods, more jobs for blacks in banking, malls, insurance and other businesses, and integrated fire departments.

The effort came at a particularly crucial time, as whites were fleeing racially changing neighborhoods in New York City while increasing numbers of upwardly mobile blacks were seeking their place in suburbia as well. "As the African-American population grew on Long Island, the civil rights movement had to respond to new demands and greater pressures," said Charles F. Howlett of Amityville, a historian and specialist on the

local civil rights movement.

That response was extraordinarily well organized, with activists schooled in everything from making protest signs and "testing" housing for discrimination to lodging effective complaints and staying calm under pressure. Still, their fight got ugly at times, with scuffles, arrests and even cross-burnings marking school integration efforts in Malverne and Amityville.

For a time, at least, the activists were successful at opening up government, jobs and a few neighborhoods for black residents. Their greatest success, however, was in focusing attention on racial discrimination in Nassau and Suffolk.

"We had hope; we had vision," said Annette Triquere of Westbury, one of many now in their 60s and 70s who were active in what they still proudly call "The Movement." "We changed people's lives," said Hazel Dukes of Roslyn, who walked a picket line at Suffolk County duck farms, protesting the conditions under which black migrants worked, long before she would become state conference president of the NAACP.

Certainly the activism did not end the quest for equal rights. "Things have changed," acknowledged Alan Singer, a professor at Hofstra University's school of education who has studied the era. "But to say they've changed is not to say that everything is solved. In some ways, Long Island today represents the inability of the civil rights movement to successfully build an equal, integrated community. It failed to break down the barriers."

Added Lynda R. Day, an assistant professor of Africana studies at Brooklyn College and author of a history of blacks on Long Island, "The problem was that no one understood how entrenched racism was."

Still, the activist period, which peaked roughly from 1963 through 1969, is significant, historians and activists agree, because for a stretch of time in Nassau and Suffolk, as it was across the United States, the civil rights movement spoke with one voice.

And that voice was powerful.

"What you had was a network of people on many different levels and in many different places who were organized, who were struggling on many fronts," Singer said. "So when it came to them getting what they wanted, there were no accidents."

Long before Lynch walked to that podium, African-Americans on Long Island had been working toward equal rights. Some sued for their freedom and property in the years of slavery. And, as their descendents settled down in segregated communities in Nassau and Suffolk, it was not uncommon to press for equal access to education. Charles Brewster's fight to get his son in a new, all-white school in Amityville in 1895, for example, led to a change in state law that limited segregation in public schools.

With the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, black Long Islanders continued to address grievances. The trend accelerated after World War II, as the Island's black population slowly began to grow - despite racial covenants in many housing developments.

"After the war, there was all this patriotic preaching about equality," said Eugene Reed, a retired Amityville dentist who served in the Army and went on to become an NAACP state conference president. "And, of course, it wasn't true for us. That knowledge stimulated more rebellion, more fighting of a system that did not include us."

That rebellion drew more attention during the 1950s, as the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott and the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown vs. Board of Education* focused national awareness on racial equality. During that period, which paralleled a boom in Long Island's population, the nonwhite population grew but at a rate far slower than that of the white population. The percentage of black residents crept from 3.2 percent in 1950 to only 3.6 percent in 1960.

As the black population grew, the NAACP seemed to be everywhere. In 1957, it publicly criticized hiring practices of Long Island school districts, charging an "almost conspiracy" between college placement bureaus and the growing local school systems in "cheating qualified Negro teachers out of jobs in Nassau and Suffolk." School districts denied the allegations, saying they couldn't find qualified candidates. "The fact that I don't know if we have any Negro teachers now should be important to show we don't think that way," the president of one Nassau school board said.

By the early 1960s, with demonstrations and sit-ins generating publicity in the South, other organizations dedicated to racial equality began to spring up on Long Island. In 1961, the newly formed Huntington Committee on Human Relations collected 1,000 pledges from residents to welcome new black residents. "The effort was inspired not only because Huntington's population of lower-income Negroes had grown greatly but because the town had wished to engage a high school music teacher of exceptional qualifications," read a news report. "But he was a Negro and Huntington discovered, to its chagrin, that no

suitable housing accommodations were available to him." During the decade, about 30 other communities would establish similar committees.

By 1962, after a number of meetings with NAACP officials, Nassau County set up its own 27-member human rights commission. "We handled complaints about everything from police to employment," the agency's first director, Farrell Jones, said recently.

The quest for civil rights on Long Island was moving slowly until the Nassau NAACP gave Lynch, a resident of Lakeview, an award for leadership. He planned long and hard what he would say that night. "Things were moving," he said in a recent interview, "but much, much too slowly. And not everybody was involved in the effort."

On that New Year's Day, Lynch brandished segregated housing, along with de facto school segregation in Malverne, Westbury and Hempstead, as "examples of the dwarf-like steps this fastest-growing county" has taken to address equal rights. From there, he moved to employment, citing businesses that long had been closed to all but a few black Long Islanders.

"Notwithstanding the valiant efforts of a few well-meaning individuals and organizations in the field of race relations," Lynch told his audience, which included Nassau County Executive Eugene Nickerson, a Democrat, and state Assembly Speaker Joseph Carlino, a Long Beach Republican, "a moral and psychological wilderness exists on Long Island, as barren as one would find anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line." Newsday ran a story about the speech with the headline: "LI Negroes Let Race Down."

The next day, Newsday ran an editorial, "Right Way, Wrong Way," chiding Lynch for his remarks and recommending moderation rather than direct action. "The answer is not a call to arms," the editorial said. "The answer is the gradual absorption of the Negro into the American community on every level . . . Time, and not very much of it, is a far better catalyst, a far better solution to an acknowledged problem that is rapidly working out anyway."

The editorial ignited still more controversy. And the state NAACP immediately jumped into the fray. "We . . . abhor and denounce the gradualism suggested by Newsday," the group said in a statement. "We stand shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Lynch, with CORE and with other organizations seeking the active participation of Negroes in the historic struggle of the Negro in the attainment of full citizenship."

With a flurry of publicity and the blessing of the venerable NAACP, Lynch moved quickly, charging that

Sealtest Dairy and Franklin National Bank did not have enough black employees and urging a boycott in leaflets distributed in Nassau and New York City. Both firms agreed to hire more blacks at all employment levels. CORE, with the active participation of supporters, black and white, moved just as quickly to seek concessions from Meadowbrook National Bank, Hempstead Bank and other financial institutions, along with defense firms and employment agencies.

While Lynch and CORE dominated the headlines - at one demonstration for integrating fire departments, Lynch scaled a fence at a firefighters contest and lay down on a track, forcing a truck to stop inches from his head - other activists across the Island were spreading their efforts over an astounding range of issues. "It seemed we were out there making trouble every day," said Mel Jackson, an NAACP member who went on to succeed Lynch. "Sometimes we would bring people to meetings and lock the doors. We wanted them to have an emotional experience."

The activists took on some Nassau and Suffolk fire departments, complaining that membership requirements barred blacks from joining. They took on local governments, including Rockville Centre and Long Beach, contending that urban renewal was being used to displace black residents rather than provide them with better housing. And they took on real estate agencies and other businesses they believed engaged in blockbusting, racial steering and redlining - tactics designed to cause white flight or steer blacks into and away from certain communities.

They were aided by sympathetic public officials, including Farrell Jones. "I was the inside guy," he said. "Some of us in the movement would come across as angry. Some of us would come across as reasonable. That was our front. We would go to whomever and say, 'Who would you rather talk to, Lincoln or me?' and we would negotiate what we needed from there."

There was also support from clergy, including Bishop Walter Kellenberg of the Diocese of Rockville Centre. "It is necessary that each individual examine his own conscience in matters of interracial and social justice," he said in a pastoral letter to Catholics in August, 1963. "It is further necessary that each of us by private and public prayer beg the Good God, unceasingly, to teach Americans that only equal opportunity for all can make the American dream of justice a reality for all of our citizens."

The activists were also aided by state and national legislation. In 1964, for example, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act. That, in turn, led to creation of the Economic Opportunity Commission in Nassau, which would grow to become the county's largest antipoverty agency. John Kearse, who would

become the agency's first black director, headed the EOC's program in the Five Towns, where the group was successful in getting housing for the area's minority residents. "That was a short, compact period of time that was so beautiful," Kearsse, who still runs the EOC, said recently, "and so fulfilling."

Local efforts were also helped by the national civil rights movement, which relied heavily on Long Island for funds, manpower and leadership.

Two influential activists were Doris and Donald Shaffer, founders of the Great Neck Committee for Human Rights. They were responsible for two of the most successful civil rights fund raisers in the United States. Both took place on Long Island and were attended by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

On a fund-raising trip in 1965, King toured segregated neighborhoods in Lakeview, Hempstead, Long Beach and West Hempstead. A few months later, he spoke at Hofstra University's commencement, where he was awarded an honorary degree. "It is one thing for the white person of good will in the North to rise up with righteous indignation when a bus is burned with freedom riders in Alabama, or when a church is bombed . . . " he told students, as a group of protesters attempted to disrupt his address.

"But it is just as important for the white person in the North to rise up with righteous indignation when a Negro cannot live in your neighborhood or when a Negro cannot get a job at your particular firm . . . "

Activist efforts often included "consciousness raising" sessions with blacks and whites. The tactics of choice, however, continued to be demonstrations, leafleting, picketing and sit-ins. And although they worked, the methods over time were attacked by whites. "As far as the Negro goes much of his shortcomings are of his own making," a Floral Park woman wrote in a letter to the editor in Newsday. "CORE and other organizations would do well to lead their people to win respect and admiration of the white man by their way of living rather than a show of force." A Northport man agreed: "I think it is pitiful when a group of self-appointed troublemakers such as CORE can dictate the policies of an institution as large as the Franklin National Bank."

Still, the civil rights workers went on, attempting the colossal tasks of integrating housing and schools. "Those were the toughest," Dukes said. "But thank God, CORE was the NAACP and the NAACP was CORE. And we had help from a lot of local human rights groups. We worked together and kept each other's spirits high."

They needed to. In housing, they ran up against years of entrenched patterns of segregation. In some

communities, African-Americans lived in substandard housing although they could afford better. Their problem: They couldn't buy or rent houses in areas where whites did not want them. On the East End, the NAACP took the problem to local officials. One Southampton official appeared unconcerned about the situation. "There are a lot of white people in this and other towns that don't live in the kinds of homes they want to live in," he said.

In 1964, Suffolk CORE and Huntington Township Committee for Human Relations camped out in tents for three days protesting an Amityville housing development that refused to sell to blacks. "Suffolk's first sit-in and sleep-in for housing equality ended . . . with a victory for the civil rights movement," Newsday reported. "Mr. and Mrs. Colin Smith, of Amityville, signed a one-year lease for a \$130-a-month, three and a half room apartment. Direct-action protest at last accomplished a quick response."

Later that year, in Syosset, a picket line sprang up when a homeowner backed off on a deal to sell to an African-American electrical engineer and his wife after receiving telephone threats, apparently from neighbors. "The 20 CORE members, who demonstrated quietly, got some unexpected support from a 12-year-old girl who left her playmates, walked to the middle of the tree-lined street and, with a piece of chalk, printed in neat, three-foot letters, Freedom for All," said a news report. The sale went through.

It was not so easy in Hicksville, where a protest against a real estate firm, Vigilant, sparked violence. Activists contended that the firm refused to show homes to blacks. A shoving match at a demonstration was broken up by scores of police.

"That was the only time I was ever afraid on a picket line," said Delores Quintyne, one of the founders of CORE in Suffolk. After eight days, CORE stopped the picketing Vigilant's offices and the firm pledged to adhere to a state law barring discrimination.

In 1963, state Commissioner of Education James Allen Jr. recommended that local districts consider busing to integrate schools. Several school boards on Long Island resisted, including those in Malverne, Manhasset and Westbury. The civil rights supporters launched demonstrations in the districts. And in Amityville, residents fought a separate proposal to build schools in the black and white sections of the community. Most of the communities ultimately reached some compromise.

In the years that followed, schools continued to be a source of conflict, as the civil rights groups attempted to fight de facto segregation and foster integration wherever they could. In Roosevelt, one-third of its

students stayed home for two days in 1965 during an NAACP protest. In Great Neck, activists - most of them white - pushed a proposal in 1967 to bus in New York City children to integrate the schools. It was voted down in an advisory referendum two years later.

The fight that generated the most controversy, however, was in Malverne. The NAACP complained to the state that black children were getting an inferior education in the district because they were largely segregated in one elementary school. The complaint led to Allen's directing Malverne to become the first district in the state to end de facto segregation. In response, more than 1,500 residents gathered in Lynbrook to protest his directive. And a community group, Taxpayers and Parents Association, urged the district to sue.

In turn, the NAACP and its supporters launched a series of sit-ins. The protests continued, culminating in a school boycott, more sit-ins and picketing. Five protestors, including Lynch, were arrested. And Eugene Reed was thrown to the floor during a struggle in one school.

Whites resisted, saying they feared the loss of their neighborhood schools, which they said were adequately integrated. At one point, a court invalidated Allen's directive. The NAACP and its supporters were incensed. "We will sit in, crawl in, lie in, stand in, chain in, pray in and the jails hold no terror for us," one protestor, Lloyd Delaney, shouted during a school board meeting.

In 1965, State Sen. Norman F. Lent Jr. (R-East Rockaway), in an attempt to preserve neighborhood schools, unsuccessfully proposed two amendments to state law that would ban students from being assigned to schools on the basis of race. Later that year, a state Court of Appeals reinstated Allen's desegregation order. In 1966, a cross was burned on the lawn of the Malverne High School. The plan was finally implemented in 1967.

"This was one of the early mobilizations in the fight for school integration in the nation, one of the early proving grounds," Alan Singer said.

Even before King was assassinated in April, 1968, the nature of the civil rights movement on Long Island began changing. Mirroring the national trend, the movement went from activist to militant. With the rise of black power, it also, by design, became less integrated. After King's death, black students on Long Island demanded courses on African history, black history and recognition of King's efforts through special programs. Sometimes there was conflict, including boycotts and fights between black and white students.

The NAACP and CORE also continued their efforts, concentrating more in black communities.

Lincoln O. Lynch became a national CORE official and left Lakeview. Eventually, he settled down in Harlem, where he now lives surrounded by African art and family photographs. Looking back, Lynch, now 78, is pleased with what occurred on Long Island almost four decades ago. He bristles at the suggestion that some at the time considered the tactics he and others used a form of blackmail.

"If that was blackmail," he said, voice rising and eyes glaring, "it was long overdue and served its purpose." If he had it to do all over again, he said, he would have involved African-American children more actively in the movement with the hope that they might have continued the fight to this day.

After all, he recalled, it was a poem he learned as a child on the island of Jamaica that moved him toward raising the stakes in the civil rights movement on Long Island. The poem, by British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, speaks of haves and have nots, insiders and outsiders, patricians and plebians in ancient Rome.

Lynch can still recite that inspiration from memory, his voice becoming deeper and measured:

"... When our latest hope is fled, ye taste of our despair,

And learn by proof, in some wild hour, how much the wretched dare."

The civil rights activists on Long Island certainly dared, historians agree. But what did they accomplish? Their spotlight on inequities on Long Island opened up housing in some neighborhoods and made urban renewal work in a few others. Their work opened up the possibility of jobs for blacks in a variety of places, from Newsday to the State University at Stony Brook to some of the regional malls.

"The struggle of the civil rights movement cracked open Long Island to blacks, gave blacks some access to communities, to schools, to jobs," Singer said. "But it has never been full access. And it won't be unless there is some change in attitudes."

Many of the issues activists identified and fought to correct remain unresolved to this day.

Long Island remains segregated, with 95 percent of black residents in Nassau and Suffolk concentrated in 5 percent of the Island's census tracts. For residents in black communities, the quality of life is substantially

different from that of their white counterparts. Black communities generally are more crowded, pay higher taxes, and have fewer businesses and fewer services than white communities. And they generally have little political clout. It took a lawsuit in Nassau to clear the way for two blacks to be elected to the county Legislature; in Suffolk, no black has ever been elected. The same holds true in many town and local governments.

Fire departments remain segregated, with the racially mixed department in the black community of Roosevelt being the exception rather than the rule - even when the department serves a predominately black community such as Wyandanch. Schools remain segregated, largely as a function of the 126 communities they serve. Teachers of any color remain in woefully short supply, as 50 of Long Island's 126 school districts last year did not employ a single black teacher. And only half of the districts employed more than one.

All of these things trouble the civil rights activists. "My heart just aches," Dukes said. "We didn't go far enough," Lynch said.

Day believes Long Island could go further, with more consciousness-raising among the increasingly diverse races and ethnic groups who now live in Nassau and Suffolk. She believes that to be essential. "Without it, our kids will continue to grow up culturally limited and unprepared to be in a world that is much more culturally diverse."

Marc Silver, a sociologist at Hofstra, also points to the increasing diversity of Long Island. In six years, demographers say, one in four Long Islanders will be black, Asian or Hispanic. By 2010, it will be one in three. (Currently, it is almost one in five.)

"Either things change or you create points of crisis," he said. "At this point, it's impossible to predict how it will get resolved."



By Joye Brown

Joye Brown has been a columnist for Newsday since 2006. She joined the newspaper in 1983 and has worked as a reporter, an editor, newsroom administrator and editorial writer.

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