

PEACE ACTIVIST HECTOR BLACK SHARES LIFE LESSONS

By Tracey Hackett | Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN

“Love is the strongest force in the universe.”

In his 92 years, Cookeville activist **Hector Black** said he’s learned that lesson many times over.



Cookeville activist **Hector Black** shakes hands and speaks with **Mushrif Choudhury**, a mechanical engineering student at Tennessee Tech University who attended an event in which Black shared stories of his life.

Although he is a humble, soft-spoken man, his life and work have been extraordinary. Black is a farmer who lives simply and sustainably day-to-day, while cultivating a life’s work dedicated to Civil Rights and all forms of peace and diversity.

In a uniform of overalls and plaid shirt, Black looks native to the Tennessee countryside. In his lifetime, however, he has explored many boundaries, both geographical and philosophical.

“Crossing these invisible lines that seem to divide us lead to the most incredible experiences,” he told an audience at Tennessee Tech University on Thursday.

Such experiences have been both painful and profound for Black. They have often happened in the most unlikely places — from World War II Army service to a black neighborhood in Atlanta and even death row.

At an event sponsored by TTU’s One World student organization, Black shared stories about what shaped his beliefs and work.

Examples from early life

@:He grew up in a lily-white neighborhood in New York.

“There wasn’t a person with even olive skin in our neighborhood, but I was fortunate to have parents who were open-minded,” Black said.

During the Great Depression, he and his two brothers often came home from school to find his mother in the kitchen, serving a meal to a vagrant man or woman.

“It affected me very much, her willingness to do whatever was the right thing to do, regardless,” Black said. That willingness once took his mother to visit a sick maid in Harlem during a time of race riots.

“She wouldn’t be dissuaded. She went out and came back, encountering no problems along the way,” he said.

From Army to Harvard

Black’s first direct experience with diversity came after he was drafted into the Army in 1943 and stationed in France.

“Men from all kinds of backgrounds were thrown together, but at that time, the Army was still segregated by race,” he said.

One night, Black and a fellow soldier were looking for a place to sleep before boarding a ship the next morning. A group of African-American soldiers welcomed them to share their tent.

“A white sergeant saw us, demanded to know what we were doing there and ran us out,” Black said.

“It made me wonder how an African-American soldier could be good enough to possibly die beside but not bunk beside,” he said.

Even as a soldier, Black said, he knew he would be unable to shoot the enemy and shared that with his friends.

“They were sympathetic, but they also told me they sure as hell wouldn’t want to be in my unit,” he said. Black was injured and put on limited service, saved from the physical and philosophical struggles of combat.

After the war, Black enrolled at Harvard University and earned a degree in sociology. His time at Harvard first introduced him to the Quaker faith. He became involved with groups providing service in poor neighborhoods, then served in an international Quaker work camp that took him to a Belgian coal mining village.

Then he traveled, eventually landing in an Israeli kibbutz, a traditional collective community that is focused on agriculture.

“By that time, I’d become interested in communal living as a possible solution to social problems,” Black said. He said he was warmly welcomed.

“During the day, we would work in the fields. At night, we would come home and have beautiful dances. We could do that. We were all still young back then,” he said.

At the edge of the community was an abandoned Arab village.

“The Israelis told me the Arab villagers had once been their friends. Following the Israeli war for independence, however, they had been ordered to drive the Arabs over the border to Lebanon,” Black said.

“It made me wonder about the things governments ask us to do and at what point we should say no, I won’t do that,” he said.

When Black learned that his beloved mother had suffered a heart attack, he returned to the United States — but the many things he’d seen, learned and experienced in Europe remained with him.

Civil Rights

@:He went to work for the American Friends Service Committee, tasked with setting up work camps for the Quaker organization, and took a room in an African-American boarding house.

Black was fully aware of putting himself in a minority position.

“It was the first time I stood out. Not being Jewish, I was a minority in Israel too, but no one knew my background there unless they asked. Here, my skin gave me away,” he said.

In the boarding house, he learned the importance of reacting to a person — not to a group. Along the way, he got married, started a family and spent eight years living in a religious community.

“When we left the community, I thought the Civil Rights movement was the most positive thing happening in our country at the time,” he said. He moved with his wife and three young daughters to Atlanta with the intention of working in the movement.

Black found a recruiting job, matching college students to kids in poor neighborhoods who needed tutoring and mentoring.

“It was a good suburban job, but I felt I couldn’t truly understand the lives of the kids I was trying to help without living where they lived,” he said.

He moved to a neighborhood where the only other white people to be seen were insurance men, he said.

“People feared not having enough money to be buried. It’s a problem that never would have occurred to me, but imagine how that must feel — not being able to bury your husband, your wife, your child,” Black said.

A daughter’s murder

@:It was in Atlanta that his family met and virtually adopted a girl whose life — and death — would change them forever.

Patricia Nuckles and her sister were daughters of a woman whose alcoholism made her an unfit mother. The Blacks took them into their home, where they — especially **Tricia** — blossomed.

When the family moved to Tennessee, **Tricia** enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville to remain close.

“We loved **Tricia**. She was our daughter by no claim of blood but by every claim of love,” Black said.

After college, she moved back to Atlanta, where she got a job and bought a house. In 2001, **Ivan Simpson**, a man who was a crack addict, broke into her home while she was at work. He ransacked her belongings for items he could trade for a hit of the drug, got a fix and reportedly came back a second time.

Tricia came home while he was still there. He tried to hide in a closet until he could leave undetected, but she found him.

He killed her.

“It was the heaviest thing our family had ever had to deal with,” Black said.

Her murder challenged Black’s Quaker faith and its central ideas of nonviolence.

“I thought I would kill the bastard myself,” he said. “I wondered where God was in all of this.” Although he didn’t know it at the time, he would find out.

Black’s faith and ideas would resurface in the eventual forgiveness of his daughter’s murderer.

It began with a conference in Boston for families of murder victims — families who shared an anti-death penalty philosophy.

“It was a tremendous support to have people of all faiths, or no faith at all, united by a wish of not seeking revenge,” Black said.

Among those were relatives of convicted murderers who’d been sentenced to execution.

“We found out they were just as wounded as we were. We had all lost someone to violence,” Black said.

The Atlanta prosecutor didn't react positively when Black's family said they didn't want to seek the death penalty for Simpson. **Simpson**, after all, was a crack addict with no living family and no other means to support himself.

Through friends in the Nashville legal system, Black and his family began learning about Simpson's background.

His childhood had been traumatic. When he was about 12, his mother declared that God ordered her to kill him and his siblings. She took them to a pool, where he and his brother managed to escape, but not before they witnessed their mother drown their sister.

"I couldn't fathom how, in the richest country in the world, there had been no one there to help him," Black said.

Simpson pleaded guilty to every charge and apologized for all the pain he had caused.

"I saw the torment of hell in his eyes," Black said.

"When I was allowed to make a statement in the courtroom, I said I hoped everyone who had been injured by this situation found God's peace. I said, 'I hope that for you too, Ivan Simpson.'"

Simpson was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole and Black has maintained a correspondence with Simpson.

He also visited inmates on Death Row.

Immigrants and refugees

@:Today's debate over immigrants and refugees is nothing new to Black.

During the Bosnian War in the 1990s, his family opened their home to a refugee family.

"They spoke no English and we spoke no Bosnian, so it sometimes got quite interesting," he said.

Black said he can't fathom the conditions it takes to make a person leave his own country.

"Imagine leaving friends and family, leaving everything familiar to you, and not even knowing if you will make it to your destination or turned away if you do get there," he said.

As for the Bosnian family, the two children have grown up. One is enrolled at Vanderbilt University, and the other is enrolled at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

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*Read more about the people and places in Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at:

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