the only food my family had to eat was scraped from the plates of white folks where my mother worked."

She could not understand then, nor can she understand now, why there is such a difference between blacks and whites: "Most white folks thought us black people just talking animals." She finds the same attitudes still exist.

When the riots had ended, Mildred and her boys returned to their tiny row-house in the crowded Negro ghetto, while we remained in the suburbs. But I think we convinced them by our actions that we are their friends. They know we are as close as the telephone. Mildred would never ask for financial help; but often a little advice helps, and sometimes we can help her climb existing barriers. We have already spent several days enrolling her son in summer school. Sometimes the run-around we get is unbelievable.

We feel that the little effort we exert in behalf of this family makes their lives easier, but we have a long way to travel before we can honestly feel our commitment is being fulfilled.

A TIME OF TRANSITION

Renee P. Carlson

Our home is in the Alexandria (Va.) Ward and we live within eight blocks of the chapel. The school district was recently redistricted to dip into the "close to downtown" areas and therefore includes many blacks from lower income and middle income homes. The make-up of the school is forty percent black, sixty percent white. The economic span of parents of children attending the school ranges from poverty to professional people in the upper middle income bracket.

After Cathy, our Seventh Grader, faced her first day in Middle School, she rushed in the front door: "Mother, did we have an exciting day . . . a race riot and everything!" The fight began when a white face called a black face a dirty name and a black fist hit a white stomach and everyone aligned according to pigment. The principal handled the situation with accustomed firmness. He expelled the offenders. However, some of the black children complained their dads would beat them and their eventual return to school was dubious, so expulsion was hardly the answer. The principal wrestled with these problems for about two weeks and then left for employment in a private school where he could continue his customary approach to discipline. Our school got a new principal whose sensitivity improved the general climate. He showed a firm friendliness — and the race riots went underground.

"Hey, white girl, give me a quarter." The quarter got a new owner.

"Hey, white girl, give me your lunch." No lunch for Cathy that day.

Our telephone rang at lunchtime. "Mother, it's Cathy. Jane says if I don't let her copy the Health Report I did last night she'll get me after school. And Mother, she's got lots of friends and she means it. What should I do?"

A slight hesitation from my end of the line, and then, "Don't let her copy it, but get some place safe and I'll pick you up after school."

"But Mother, they beat up Susan last month. You'll be sorry if I never walk again!"

And then the words tumbled out: "I hate Negroes. We all do. We whites have to stick together. The Negro kids do. We tried giving them a chance. But they're too mean."

Cathy's home room teacher is a black man. Maintaining good discipline while projecting warmth and compassion, he seems to have won the admiration of his students. On several occasions he has talked to his "mixed" class, sketching for them the dimensions of his own frustrations, and placing in perspective problems in the school. After these talks, Cathy's reflections on the mood of the classroom have usually ended with ". . . and even some of the toughest boys in the back of the room were crying."

Early one Sunday morning a police officer knocked at our front door. He had a summons for Cathy to appear in Juvenile Court. Her purse had been stolen at school the week before. It had been recovered with most of its belongings, but the school decided to press charges. Having caught the girls involved, the principal wanted to make an example of them and thus, hopefully, end a rash of thefts that had plagued the school for several weeks.

At first Cathy thought she would be afraid to be a witness against the girls because they were Negro. But, reconsidering, she thought it "safe" because these girls were in "self-contained" classes, and she rarely saw them. (The children receive placement according to educational background, achievement, and behavior patterns. Those having specific problems are grouped into self-contained classes where they can receive more supervision and control.)

Two weeks later, Cathy and I went to Juvenile Court. The Juvenile Division is in a tiny building, caught between rickety townhouse residences. Its front faces a major downtown highway, where large diesel trucks push past in a torrent of noise and fumes.

We were directed to a flight of stairs and a bilious green waiting room equipped with creaking folding chairs. A small foyer led to the judge's chambers, and to one side stood an ominous swinging gate which led into a clerical inner sanctum. The whole setting was bound to impress a youthful offender with the feeling that he had just entered a simulated Hell.

Waiting in the smoke-filled room for the judge to call the case, we were faced with the awkward fact that the two accused girls and their parents sat directly across from us. Embarrassed lifting of the eyes, wispy smiles of recognition, exaggerated shifts of position, ceremonious folding of coats kept all of us busy for about ten minutes. Cathy and I then turned toward each other and engaged in quiet, almost whispered talk. On the other side of the room, the two Negro girls, bored with the initial problem of avoiding eyes, began to play. They took turns bobbing up and down on each other's laps. The mother periodically cautioned them to be quiet and then reverted to a silent study of her feet. She was a slender, sad woman with a shiny, freckled face. She wore red anklets which bunched about her skinny ankle bones. Long, tapered fingers held together her semi-buttonless coat, which concealed an old cotton housedress.

Each girl was accompanied by one parent. The father sat a few chairs away from his daughter. He handled, thoughtfully, a worn fedora. Smoking a cigarette, he dropped the ashes in the cuffs of his shabby pants. The two young girls continued their game with periodic pauses for trips to the water fountain.

After a two-hour wait, the school principal, guidance counselor, and the rest of us passed through the door into the judge's chambers.

Playing in the waiting room had not prepared the two girls for a solemn court of law. They continued to giggle and poke at each other. Presently, the judge extracted a large, wooden paddle from her drawer and laid it on the desk, promising it would fall upon their backsides if the giggling did not subside.

The names were read: Ellen Sue .... and Jill .... The judge advised the parents that they had a right to legal counsel if they so chose. The mother in red anklets, her face strained to hear the judge, began to speak. "If you hav' ta take Ellen Sue then I guess that's the best thing. It's gotten so I jest can't do nothin' with her anymore."

I took a quick glance at Cathy. She was watching Ellen Sue and her mother. An expression of disbelief clouded her brown eyes.

"No, no, no. I'm not asking to take your daughter, only advising you of your rights." The judge dismissed the perplexed mother and turned to the father of the other girl.

"Now, I think we have a problem here. Your last name is not the same as your daughter's. Are you her real father?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I mean Judge, I really am. Only Jill has her Mamma's name before we wuz married. We jes neva could afford to change nothin'."

The principal read the case against the girls and described the incidents leading to the theft. Cathy verified this information. In their reports the girls' teachers had said they were good students. Jill, however, had shown a bad temper, used abusive language, and had taken things that didn't belong to her. (Cathy told me earlier that while waiting outside the principal's office on the day of the theft she had heard Jill yelling inside. Jill had cursed and cried that she hated whites because they had everything and furthermore she didn't feel bad stealing from them.)

"Did you take the purse, Jill?" the judge asked.

"Yes, I did. My father said to tell the truth and I have," the girl concluded.

Cathy and I were then excused from the room prior to the judge's talk with the girls and the setting of fines or punishment. Our leaving was awkward. The anxious mother leaned toward her daughter and said, "Ellen Sue, tell the lady you're sorry."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am."

Jill responded at her father's prodding. "I'm sorry."

Cathy later decided her day in court was appropriate material for a talk she was to give in church. She phrased her closing sentences as an appeal for white people to offer the hand of help and friendship to their black neighbors.

By early spring, things were running more smoothly at school. Then, the assassin's bullet riddled the status quo. Martin Luther King was dead. The night of the murder my husband and I talked with the children about the sickening tragedy of violent death.

The next day as Washington burned in the riots, Cathy's school went into shock. Negro children stood at the windows like caged animals while pleas to "sit down" went unheeded. Eyes focused on the street; the students' common hope was that bands of other young Negro people from the high school would come to unlock the writhing anger in their own classrooms. Administrators and teachers were able to keep waves of roving youngsters at a minimum. The expected invasion of high school kids never materialized and the anger was spent in whispering, speculation and rumor. The principal walked the halls, calm and reassuring. His white authority was a target, however, for angry "accidental" bumping in the crowded halls between classes. Downcast Negro teachers talked together quietly. Some made plans to attend the funeral in Atlanta. Their frustration was equal to that of their black students, but dignity and pride forbade hostile outbursts.

On this day, communication between the races had dipped to a new low. In a moment of mutual anguish, Cathy extended a "hand of friendship" to her long avowed black enemy, Jane. Their first note passed hands. Cathy's read, "My mother greatly admired Martin Luther King."

Jane replied, "You mean your mother really cared? You know when they find the white man who shot him the Negroes are going to try and kill him. They wouldn't need to put him in jail or waste the taxpayers' money. We will do it for the country. I should care, though, because anyone who tries to help the Negroes gets killed. First it was JFK, now King. Something has to give."

A few days after the riots, we drove with our family through the burned out area in downtown Washington. Ensnarled in rush-hour traffic, our car made frequent stops. Charred ruins, stacks of blackened cans, gutted interiors, jagged glass, white chalk scrawls of "Soul" on brick walls all told the story of tragic days and nights. Uniformed soldiers patrolled the street corners; their heavy guns packed over khaki-covered shoulders were reassuring, yet disturbing, on the streets of our city.

Our children, confronted with the reality of what had previously been a TV experience, searched for answers to their questions:

"Did people live above that store? "Did they get burned? Did they save their children? What does Soul mean? Where will they buy their food now? Do they like living here? Will they burn any more places?"

For some questions we had no answers.

Later, at a school dance, "Battle of the Bands" was the billing. The Soul Brothers were competing with two white bands. Cathy came home fuming. "Oh, Mother, the word's going around that if the Soul Brothers don't win tonight the Negro kids will riot. Doesn't that just burn you up?" Cathy and