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BIRTHRIGHT OF A BOY

"I love you all" is a message to my family, a postscript to every letter we receive from a little dark skin friend who lives in New York City.

We met Albert seven years ago when he came to our home for a brief visit through the New York Herald Tribune Fresh Air Program. The purpose of this program is to provide country vacations for city youngsters. The result, even more important, yet unpublicized, is the love learned, earned and shared by these children of every nationality and their country host families.

In the spring of 1959 we began to think about the summer ahead of us. We had six of our seven children then, and all of us knew that a vacation trip would be impossible. Grandpa Fraser lived with us, and the children's Uncle Harry, weak with leukemia. We had a full house, but little money.

One Sunday the children came home from Church enthusiastic about an announcement in the bulletin.

"Mrs. Hamlin wants more families to take the Fresh Airs, Mom, can we get one?" shouted Ruthi. I knew that the "Fresh Air" she meant was a city child, and to "Get one" was to invite him for a two-week visit. We talked about the idea, and it seemed a good one. We couldn't take a trip, but we could give a vacation to someone else.

I believed then that I was being a good scout. I would do my duty for an underprivileged child, and another person could take a turn the next time around. With so many children and relatives to cook and clean for anyway, another child would make little difference. So we moved beds and children around to make room for an extra boy in a top bunk.

The children were excited, but I met the appointed train from New York City apprehensively. Could I stand the strain and the extra responsibility of a stranger in the house for two weeks? My steady thought was that to do something for someone would be a lesson for my children. They learned a much more valuable lesson from the experience than just to be kind and good to a boy of a different race. They learned that the personality and character of any person should be judged, not the nationality.

Albert has been a twice-a-year visitor in our home since that first summer. A short Christmas holiday is also a part of the Fresh Air Program. We've seen "our" boy grow from a grinning ten-year-old, who hugged us on arrival, to a tall, hand-shaking young adult.

Talking, laughing and eating together, one night half a chocolate cake at midnight, when they were all supposed to be sleeping, is one way my children learned racial tolerance. Dark and light hands alike emptied the cookie jar almost as fast as it was filled.

Our Ellen, now five, took her first baby steps from her brother, Jack, to Albert's waiting arms. My camera was ready. Albert has been a part of our family as long as she has – to her, Al is another big brother.

Grandpa died when he was ninety-four, and Albert felt the loss. Those two learned so much from each other. The old man's early life in Canada was related again for an eager listener, and Albert told Gramp about the crowded city.

"I can't swim in that pool – there's mud on the floor," said Al, the first time my boys took him swimming. It took some time to convince our city bred friend that the natural base of a pond or lake was not cement.

And when I scolded him for a bicycle ride that took him to the next town, he grinned. "Gee, Mom, I only went to the end of the block."

Not only my own, but even the neighborhood children learned that people can be alike inside, no matter what the skin color may be. The baseball games, visits to the local field days and fairs, the picnics shared by these children during their impressionable early teen years, must certainly have had a lasting effect on these boys and girls, our new generation of adults.

Albert had pet names for his friends: "Skinny-bones;" "Fat-boy;" "The Little Green Bomb." He still asks about these pals of five and six years ago in his letters. These could hardly be lifetime friendships. Our family has since moved from that small town, and Al may never meet these same boys and girls again. But the experience of playing and loafing together on hot summer days will surely prove to be a built-in resistor to the violence of the racial riots we read about, for all of the children involved.

Have I helped to keep this boy away from the New York City gang fights and out of the big city school mobs? I like to think I have. Since Al's first country vacation, he knew that with involvement in such affairs he would forfeit his right to visit us. He has a job after school, but not to buy switchblades or blackjacks. His money is saved for a train ticket back to us next summer. He has passed the age limit for vacationing through the agency.

Our newest "Fresh Air" is ten-year-old Louis, who came last summer for the first time. With his big eyes, his enthusiasm for living and his ready smile, Louis gave the whole neighborhood a feeling of shame for the people of our nation involved in racial conflict.

A close friend of ours is as anxious as we are for Louie's next visit. He likes to eat, and she likes to bake. "Mrs. O'Bryan, you sure make good cookies," from Louie was enough to show one more person that inside, a boy is a boy. She packed a box of cookies for his return trip to New York almost too big for him to carry.

Our birthright is to be known, like, or disliked, for the person we are, not for the family we were born to.

My children have learned this without lectures or readings. By living. I'm proud when I hear one of them say to a friend, affectionately, "Meet my brother, AL." I'll be proud, too, when Louie jumps from the train next summer, and yells, "Hi, Mom."