When the Hendersons Came to Norman

By Omer Gillham
Photos by Jaconna Aguirre

Making a difference in the name of racial understanding comes at a very high price.

Today, realtors say, Norman home ownership by African-Americans hardly causes a ripple in the sea called race relations. But in 1967, the sale of the house to a nine-member black family caused a titanic fuss among residents of the area, says retired realtor Sam Matthews, '40 B.S.

"There was an unspoken rule among realtors," Matthews explains. "No one would sell to blacks, and that's the way it was back then. Fortunately, times have changed for the better. I think it was one of the best things that ever happened."

It did not matter then that the buyer was George Henderson, a Detroit educator highly recruited by the University of Oklahoma to teach sociology. It did not matter that Henderson had earned his Ph.D. at Wayne State University or served as assistant superintendent of Detroit Public Schools or that 17 years had passed since Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher breached the barriers to blacks at OU.

It did not matter that Henderson took a $5,000 pay cut to come to Oklahoma because he thought he could make a real difference. Finally it did not matter that Norman, with its newly appointed community relations committee, was a step ahead of a 1968 federal law that guaranteed fair housing for minorities.

Matthews, now 81, says residents feared that blacks owning Norman homes would lower property values. Before 1967, African Americans rented in Norman or lived in Oklahoma City.

On his second try, Matthews found
The young George Henderson moved his wife and seven children to Norman in 1967 and changed the way a city and a university regard its residents.

George and Barbara Henderson recall paying approximately $25,000 for the house, which they remodeled into a six-bedroom dwelling for their seven children. The Hendersons, married for 45 years, will celebrate 30 years there this year.

"We’d do it again," Barbara Henderson insists. "The positives have outweighed the negatives, and that’s not minimizing the negatives. There was atrocious behavior by some, who never took the time to meet us or understand what we were about.

"Just when we thought we couldn’t bear a certain situation or thought we had made the wrong decision by coming here, something would happen that let us know we were doing the right thing," she says. "We’re not an overly religious family but something divine would happen right on time.”

George Henderson, who has written and helped co-author 26 books and nurtured OU's Human Relations Department into the school's largest master's program, recalls angry whites often threw garbage in his front yard and made telephone calls all hours of the night, saying: "I’ll get you, nigger. Get out of town, nigger.”

"Early on, I had some doubts. I thought I was crazy for taking a $5,000 pay cut and moving a family with seven kids to Norman," says Henderson, now 64. "It was often hostile and unsettling, but there were a few key people at the University and within the community who helped us make it through. That was the difference. We wouldn’t have made it without their help.”

Today Henderson admits that he never intended to come to Norman because he already had position and respect in Detroit.

“I visited the University of Oklahoma to see what the state was like, not to get a job,” Henderson says. “During my interview with faculty, staff and students, it became evident to me that the University had some of the most talented and dedicated persons I had ever met.

“There was a critical mass of individuals who sought to improve race relations at the University and throughout the state and nation,” he adds. “They were proactive advocates for social change; they were civil rights warriors who taught racial tolerance by living it.”

The welcoming committee for the Hendersons in 1967 was headed by George Lynn Cross, OU’s revered seventh president, and his wife, Cleo.

Cross, who has written several books on OU history that include *Blacks in White Colleges*, immediately invited the Hendersons to the president’s home, now known as Boyd House.

"The president and Cleo made us feel welcome,” Henderson says. "The children enjoyed it the most.”

The Hendersons, who are from...
single-child families, had six girls and one boy. Their children desegregated Norman schools but at a heavy price.

After attending a private university school, they moved into public schools to be met by hatred and prejudice among students and a few teachers.

Some teachers would put the Henderson children on the spot for something their outspoken father might have said in connection with equal rights, black power or prejudice.

"I said I would do this again but I would hope to do it without the children," Barbara Henderson says. "They suffered deep psychological and emotional scars. The girls had no social life. Our son would be threatened if he looked at anyone."

The Henderson home became a sanctuary for their children. Each night, around the dinner table, they would listen to their children’s stories, telling them they were good enough and that things would get better.

But even in the bad times, the Henderson children enjoyed some privileges other children—white or black—did not have.

The Hendersons hosted black speakers and performers appearing at the University. Singer Cleo Laine, musician Nat Adderley, television producer Tony Brown and poet Maya Angelou—as well as Bill Russell and the more controversial Angela Davis and Dick Gregory—might stay overnight. President Cross and his successor, J. Herbert Hollomon, or Sooner coaching great Bud Wilkinson also might drop by.

Their father might tell stories about marching with Martin Luther King Jr. during his Detroit days.

"This house has a lot of memories, good and bad," Barbara Henderson says. "We have no hard feelings for our neighbors or for Norman people in general. I focus on the positive, but I will never forget the past. I can forgive and remember. I cannot forgive and forget."

George Henderson had been at OU less than a year when he was asked to lead a local memorial address for King, who had been slain in April 1968 in Memphis.

"I was driving to work when I heard Dr. King had been killed," Henderson recalls. "Everything seemed to stop, and I cried."

More than 1,500 students and faculty members gathered on the south oval to join Henderson in a local mourning for King.

"I remember looking out into mostly white faces that day. I saw hurt, and I saw tears, and I knew then that we were a community. Before that, I had been thinking we must learn to get along or perish."

A group of agitators also attended the memorial. "They were yelling..."
racial slurs and saying 'good riddance' to Dr. King. But they were the minority that day."

Henderson describes Martin Luther King as a phenomenon that had to be experienced.

"How do you describe a charismatic person?" he asks. "Dr. King seemed to look into you rather than look at you. He was a great listener always concerned about doing what was right for the masses. Selfless acts to help others were his life."

Henderson also offers a view of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakahn and Malcolm X.

"Farrakahn is a necessary voice in the human rights struggle and a reminder of the extreme measures and views a race can believe if that race is denied equal access to the American dream," Henderson says. "The antidote to Farrakahn is equal employment opportunities and fair treatment. Malcolm spent most of his time with low-income blacks. He was accessible.

"It would be untrue to say we made no progress in the race relations, equal employment and fair housing," Henderson adds. "But much remains to be done. We have taken only small steps in these areas, but they have been important steps."

Acceptance by Norman residents was a slow process gained one person at a time, says Barbara Henderson, who was the first recipient of Norman's Human Rights Award in 1985, recognition of her seven years as chair of the city's Human Rights Commission.

She contends that attitudes are changed when people meet and talk. "I guess I've always believed that differences among people could be resolved through reason and conversation. We all have the same fears and needs. My grandmother taught me that. She also taught me that I was a valuable human being."

Barbara Henderson continues her attitude-changing work today but on a different front than her husband. She's involved with Jazz in June concerts and the Cimarron Circuit Opera Company, where she is teamed with Matthews, her old realtor friend. She recently was appointed to the steering committee of Families First and is a stakeholder in LINK Norman, a communitywide civic improvement initiative.

Her agenda is not to bring white people around to black thinking, but she will act if given the opportunity.

"George once said that I feel superior when I confront people about their attitudes," she says. "That's not it. I feel superior in my ability to help people reach a new awareness about their attitudes."

The Hendersons have transcended racism and bigotry without forgetting the horrors of segregation and unequal treatment for black Americans.

They can talk about a mean, white America that has changed for the better but still needs changing. Yet their hard-won acceptance within American society has led them to a disturbing realization: Prejudice is a two-way street.

"Black Americans can be just as racist as white Americans," George Henderson says. "Individuals in any race have the potential to be ignorant and closed-minded. That is what we must avoid at all costs if we are to live together and get along without destroying each other."

Henderson recognized his prejudice against whites when white suitors called on his daughters. It was "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" in reverse.

"I was confronted with my own prejudice. I had to decide if I would do what I had been preaching or be a hypocrite. I struggled at first," he admits.

The Hendersons are a multiracial family with three white sons-in-law and one white daughter-in-law. They have a "United Nations" grandchild, who is part French, Mexican, African-American and German.

The Henderson house on Osborne Drive is still a place where the adult children can go when troubled. This warm place bustles on Thanksgiving and Christmas with the Henderson family, neighbors and close friends.

The house is also a place of lively discussion about race and equal opportunity. "The discussions can involve strong views," Barbara Henderson says, "and I try to stay away from black-and-white or us-and-them arguments. We've got to move beyond that."

Outside the home, George Henderson's views are still widely sought, almost to a fault, by news gatherers.

"Many people turn to me for the black response to black controversies and issues," he says. "I've always been willing to respond, and I will continue. But it is important to include others who are living on the front line of prejudice in these dialogues."

Henderson is not as concerned as his black peers about the so-called waning of the civil rights spirit within today's African-Americans.

"Just wait until someone calls them a nigger or denies them a job," he says confidently. "They'll respond quicker and smarter than we did because they already know black is beautiful. They don't have to win that battle all over again."

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**George Henderson at OU**

George Henderson was the University of Oklahoma's first African-American distinguished professor, being named a David Ross Boyd Professor in 1985 and a Regents Professor in 1989. In 1996 he was appointed dean of the College of Liberal Studies. As director of the advanced studies program, he remains involved with the Department of Human Relations, which he had built into one of the finest programs of its kind in the Southwest.

In addition to his regular duties, Henderson meets and counsels black students at the Henderson-Tolson Activity Center, named to honor him and professor emeritus of modern languages Melvin B. Telson Jr.

"Throughout my tenure at the University, I have been multidimensional," he says. "I have tried to be a mentor and role model for all students, not just black students or other students of color. Nor have my community service activities focused only on race relations.

"This University will always have a special place in my heart," he says. "Indeed, I love being a Sooner."

This article was adapted from The Norman Transcript, where Omer Gillham is a general assignments reporter and Jaconna Aguirre is a staff photographer.