

NEVER *Afraid*

by Rebekah Grier

Sanford's Ingrid Burton Nathan shares her experience as the first black student to integrate Sanford Junior High School



In 1962, Ingrid Burton became the first black student to walk through the doors of Sanford Junior High School (now Sanford Middle School). That morning, the whole school stood watching as police officers escorted her inside. Over the next four years, despite plenty of negativity, hatred, and cruelty, Ingrid was never afraid and never let herself be defined by those who fought against history's tide.

The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ulysses Burton, Ingrid grew up in Sanford with her parents' funeral home as her playground. She attended Hopper Elementary School and then Crooms Academy for seventh and eighth grade. Just before ninth grade, Ingrid's father posed an incredible question.

"One night my dad came home and he asked me, 'Baby, how would you like to go to the white school?' It was like asking me if I wanted to go to the candy store," Ingrid recalls. "I was always curious, so my eyes were wide open. I didn't want to be white, I just wanted to know about these people, and I wanted to know why we were less than they were. It didn't seem right to me. Something didn't add up. And it was a mystery why there was less expected of me as a black person. But he asked me, and I said yes."

Growing up, Ingrid had very little contact with white children. No friendships had been formed, and only one or two brief, casual interactions were all Ingrid could remember. But she was intensely curious. Ingrid and her many cousins regularly crossed Celery Avenue (the dividing line between Sanford's old white and black neighborhoods) and rode through the white neighborhoods on their bikes.

"We would look at the homes and the people looking at us," recalls Ingrid. "We weren't wanted there. One day, somebody let some dogs loose on us. We ran from the dogs. I left the bicycle."

One year for Halloween, Ingrid's cousins encouraged her to dress as a ghost with a sheet covering her whole body except for the light side of her hands. The ruse was designed to trick white homeowners into giving her candy as Ingrid trick-or-treated in their neighborhood, something black children were strongly

discouraged to do at the time. It worked. Ingrid knocked on the doors, shouted "Trick or treat!" and her cousins would emerge from the bushes once the candy had been secured.

"So when dad asked [about attending the white school], I thought, 'Yeah, I've been crossing the line all the time,'" says Ingrid. "I had always been crossing the line."

But Ingrid's stepmother, Cleo, was opposed to her integrating at Sanford Junior High School. Having grown up in Live Oak, Florida, in Suwannee County, Cleo Burton was aware that mid-

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century Florida had the highest rate of lynchings in the nation. In fact, Cleo knew of a black boy who was murdered by a white girl's father because he had written her a love note. Cleo had also personally known Harry T. Moore, the first prominent Civil Rights leader to be killed in the United States. He had been Cleo's first-grade teacher in Live Oak. Burton's Funeral Home had buried him.

"She understood how people were treated, and she did not want anything to happen to me," says Ingrid of her stepmom. "But she did not tell me those things. I didn't know anything but my own experiences. And my experiences with whites were playful, so I didn't have any fear going in there with the white kids."

Though Ingrid was fearless, there were many who did not want her there. The night before Ingrid's first day, she received an anonymous threatening phone call that told her, "You'd better not go to that white school tomorrow. You tell your parents that you don't want to go to that white school. You'd better not go." Anyone else would have been alarmed, but not Ingrid. She was

so unaffected that she even forgot to tell her parents about the call. She hung up the phone and went to bed.

The next four years were hard – ninth grade at Sanford Junior High School and the remaining years at Seminole High – but Ingrid took it all in stride. She had very few friends. Boys would hug the wall when she passed, not wanting to touch her. She was rejected from entering any clubs at school. Ingrid was called [REDACTED] and repeatedly ostracized on the school bus. One boy was especially bold and threw a spitball on her.

“I almost got into a fight with him,” Ingrid remembers. “But the bus driver, who was white, talked to me at length after the incident and told me that I had a better chance in life than that white boy because his family was dysfunctional, and she didn’t want me to stoop to that level. She said I had a better future ahead of me. And all I could think of was the phrase, ‘Ignorance is bliss,’ that I learned in seventh grade at Crooms Academy. If you’re ignorant of somebody’s situation, you can hate people and not care. You’re ignorant and you’re happy. But because the bus driver told me the boy’s situation, I couldn’t hate him anymore. I couldn’t be happy anymore hating him, because I knew better. For myself, I wanted to hate him, and I just wanted to be angry and probably go through the rest of my life hating white people, but I couldn’t do that.”

Walking home from school one day, a boy from the basketball team threw a drink at Ingrid while driving by in his car. Boys especially mistreated and antagonized her.

“They can’t take that back, and they’ve never apologized,” says Ingrid. “They may never come to apologize. I had to live my life without an apology. And you have to learn to get through and get over things, especially with race. You have a life to live.”

Despite the constant rejection and hatred, Ingrid was an excellent student and did well in her classes.

“My father’s method of encouraging me in school was to sit me on his knee, look me in the eye and say, ‘I love you by jingos, by James.’ He said that to me every day, and he would brag about me constantly,” Ingrid says. “And when I showed him my report card, he didn’t bribe me with money. He didn’t fuss or chastise me. He didn’t take away privileges. He just said, ‘That’s good, baby. Now make the C a B, and make the B an A.’ And based on the fact that I knew how much he loved me, and because that was all he asked me to do, I broke my neck for my dad. I would rather die than bring home a C.”

Because of her grades, Ingrid was inducted into the National Honor Society and found great acceptance there.

After long, hard days at school, Ingrid would go home and promptly forget about the trials of her day. They weren’t important to her.

“I would go home and get into my studies,” Ingrid says. “After any adversity at school, I never told anyone about it. I would think about these things and about how unfair it was, but once I got home with my crazy cousins, and then got on the phone and talked to my boyfriend, I would never talk about what I went through. I never knew why I didn’t. I was just glad to break out, go home, and enjoy life.

“I wasn’t trying to be brave,” Ingrid says, humbly. “I was a very resilient young person. I would bounce back easily. When things



10-year-old Ingrid



Ingrid in 12th grade at age 18



The Nathan Family

hit us now, we think about stuff in the past. But back then, I didn’t have anything to compare it to. I just went through it and said, ‘Okay, I’m done with that.’”

After high school, Ingrid attended Florida Southern College and eventually became a Spanish teacher. She married her childhood sweetheart and longtime boyfriend, Ron Nathan, the same young man Ingrid would call after hard days at school. After a brief time in Virginia, they again settled in Sanford. Ingrid taught Spanish at Lake Brantley High School for 20 years and at Lake Mary High School for 17 years. Ron is currently the principal of Midway Elementary School of the Arts.

“I like opening the doors of communication,” says Ingrid. “I did that when I integrated. The door was closed. I walked through the door. When I talk to students today, I tell them, ‘I’m the reason you’re sitting here, together. Your classroom wouldn’t look like this without people like me.’”

Ingrid compares her integration with the first wave in a battle; she paved the way to make subsequent attempts more successful. Remembering younger friends from her neighborhood like Ricardo Gilmore, Alvin Taylor, and Lou Charles Harold, who attended Seminole High School after she did, Ingrid says, “My little brothers, they looked up to me. I went in first, and then they followed me.”

Now retired, Ingrid gives talks and lectures for anyone who asks to hear her story.

“They want to know what it was like because it just seems so unreal to us today,” Ingrid says. “And I guess when people hear me speak, they’re comparing what used to be with what it is now to make a better tomorrow. I don’t speak to make people angry about the past. I speak to make people understand that there can be a better tomorrow.”