

Theodore Newkirk

Theodore Newkirk is an unsung civil rights hero living right here in St. Mary's County. He has striven over a long lifetime to realize Martin Luther King's dream of justice and equality for all, while heeding King's caution to act "on the highest plane of dignity" and without hatred. His leadership in local civil rights causes over three decades brought about significant, measurable advances in the County that reverberated nationally.

Growing up near Wilmington, North Carolina, where his memories include a near-lynching of a young neighbor, Newkirk thought of himself as a "country boy." When he moved with his family from Baltimore to St. Mary's County in 1954 to take a job on the naval base, he was not sure that he was ready for the "country" experience again (and his wife was pretty sure she was not). Fifty-five years and several children later, the Newkirks are content with their lives in the County and proud of the contributions they have made.

Newkirk was active on the Education Committee of the NAACP in the late 1950s during the legal struggle to integrate the St. Mary's County Public Schools. He was instrumental in desegregating the public schools, both as a member of the NAACP team that successfully sought court-ordered entrance to the all-white Great Mills High School for Joan and Conrad Groves, and on a personal level as well, as a parent who chose to send his own children to formerly all-white county schools. He is not one to talk the talk without walking the walk.

As president of St. Mary's County Branch of the NAACP in the 1960s and 1970s, Newkirk led the effort to work with county schools, and county government to integrate services and achieve greater inclusion and equity in services. He also worked closely with the military and civilian organizations at Patuxent River Naval Air Station to improve community relations (see attached Enterprise photo).

Faced with discriminatory treatment himself as an engineer at Pax River, he sued the Navy and won, thereby championing equal treatment on the job not just for himself but for other minority workers on military bases across the country. This action and others like it compelled the Navy to live up to its expressed ideals.

He took on the struggle for ending discriminatory practices in the County Fire and Rescue Squads as well (see attached Enterprise article). He saw integration in the squads as a way to bring the community closer together and "take a step towards ridding ourselves of segregation in Southern Maryland." This was significant work that brought about fundamental change in the social and political networks in the County.

Newkirk and his wife Virginia actively participated with other community members to protest segregation in housing in their neighborhood around the Pax River Base. As with the fight for desegregation of the public schools, he and his family were involved on both personal and institutional levels.

Now in his eighties, Newkirk is less involved in civic affairs, but participated as a member of the Public Action Committee, a community service organization that fund raises for organizations including Christmas in April, County Libraries, and Leah's House. In 2003 he generously contributed his time and memories to help Great Mills High students involved in an oral history project research the desegregation of their school. The students were amazed to hear that this soft-spoken gentleman sitting in their classroom had helped the first African American students enter their long segregated school in 1958. His willingness to talk with the students helped bring an important history lesson to life.

In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, many of Theodore Newkirk's civil rights activities put him at odds with less progressive members of his community. The stances he took were based on his notions of what was right, not what was popular. Though he received a Human Relations Commission Award in 1988, his forward thinking and dedication to the cause of greater social equality in St. Mary's County has won him few accolades. An award for his valiant service toward "realizing the dream" is long past due. I hope that the Award Committee will choose to honor Mr. Newkirk in January for a lifetime of work in the cause.