

Oral History - The Battle Over School Integration in Malverne

by Joyce Kenny

Norman Lent Defends Neighborhood Schools

Norman F. Lent, Jr. was born in Oceanside, NY in 1931 and graduated from Malverne High School in 1948. At that time, according to Lent, Malverne had some Black students and the school was "integrated with no problems." In 1952, Lent received a B.A. from Hofstra University. He earned his law degree from Cornell University in 1957.

In 1962, Norman Lent was elected to the New York State Senate as a Republican. He served in the State Senate until 1970, when he was elected to the United States House of Representatives from the 5th district. Congressman Lent represented Long Island residents in Washington until 1993. Currently, he is a partner in the government relations and consulting firm of Lent and Scrivner in Washington, DC.

When he served in the State Senate, Norman Lent's constituency included the Malverne school district. This included the village of Malverne, part of the village of Lynbrook, and the community of Lakeview.

In the mid-1960's, Malverne parents were divided over a state imposed school integration plan. According to Senator Lent, many white families had moved to Malverne from New York City because it was a comfortable suburban area where their children could attend "nice neighborhood elementary schools" that were near their homes.

However, in 1963, the New York State Education Commissioner responded to complaints by the NAACP and Black parents living in Lakeview that the Malverne School District was racially segregated. He ordered the reorganization of all of the district's elementary schools to insure that they were integrated. The proposed plan assigned different grades to each of the district's three elementary schools and required that children be bused away from their neighborhood schools.

As the local representative in state government, Senator Lent supported the parents who opposed the dismantling of neighborhood schools in order to achieve racial balance. He stood up for Malverne's citizens and spoke at rallies and Parent-Teacher Association meetings. Lent believed that "the white people of Malverne were not racists." They opposed busing because "they were upset that they would have to send their kids into a strange neighborhood. Some of these kids had not even crossed the street without holding their mother's hand and now they were told they had to go miles away from home to school in Lakeview."

As an example of the problem created by the state's school integration plan, Lent told the story of a white mother with three children, one in kindergarten, one in second grade, and one in fourth grade. "Her kids used to be able to go to the same school hand-in-hand. Now they were going to be bused to different schools. The mother would have to join three PTA's. This was not fair and not what that family had in mind when they bought their house in Malverne."

Lent explained that because of the threat of forced busing "white parents started pulling their kids out of public schools and sending them to Catholic or other religious schools. They also protested by electing school board candidates who took their side and voted down school budgets which included money to fund busing." Lent believes that because of continued community opposition from both whites and Blacks, busing funds were always voted down. As a result of this activism "no child ever took a bus in Malverne."

In 1964, Senator Lent introduced amendments to the New York State Education Law to outlaw the busing of students on the basis of race in order to achieve integration. Lent believed that his views were consistent with the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education* case of 1954. According to Lent, "the Supreme Court case stated that Ms. Brown could not be bused outside of her neighborhood because of her color." Lent argued that this same idea should prevent the busing of white students out of their neighborhoods for the purpose of creating racial balance. However, this proposal was defeated several times in the Democratic-controlled State Assembly after having passed in the State Senate. The New York State Legislature eventually approved a Neighborhood School Law that Norman Lent introduced in 1969, but the U.S. Supreme Court declared that the law violated the United States Constitution and was "unconstitutional."⁵¹

In Congress, Norman Lent continued his campaign to defend neighborhood schools and outlaw busing to promote racial integration. He proposed an amendment to the United States Constitution stating: "No public school student shall, because of his race, creed or color, be assigned to or required to attend a particular school." Congressman Lent argued that the amendment was necessary because "communities throughout this nation are in a state of disarray or are being threatened with educational turmoil because of numerous court orders calling for the achievement of 'racial balance' or racial quotas in our public schools." Despite Congressman Lent's efforts, this amendment was never passed by Congress.⁵²

Questions:

- 1- Why did Norman Lent become involved in the Malverne school integration controversy?
- 2- You are a constituent living in the district represented by State Senator (or Congressman) Lent. Write him a letter expressing your views on his role in the school integration controversy.
- 3- If you were Supreme Court Justice and the Malverne case was argued in court, how would you have ruled? Write a statement explaining your views.
- 4- In the battle over school integration in Malverne, different "rights" and principles were in conflict. On one side of the controversy, people argued for equal education and racial justice. On the other side, people demanded local control over community schools and democratic decision-making. In your opinion, can these kind of conflicts be resolved in a way that is satisfactory to all parties? Explain your views.

Roland Cook - Teacher, Malverne Schools

Roland Cook worked in Malverne's junior and senior high school from 1958 until 1969. He started as an English teacher in the junior high school and eventually moved to the high school. He left Malverne to become the director of guidance at Half Hollows Hill West High School in Dix Hills. Cook believes that the campaign to integrate Malverne schools was so bitter because of white prejudice.

When Roland Cook started teaching in Malverne, there were three elementary schools, Woodfield Road, Linder Place, and Davidson Avenue. The Woodfield Road School was already predominately Black. According to Cook, "the powers-that-be on the school board claimed that the schools were equal. They all had the same books." But Cook feels that there was something different about the all-Black school. It was after the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision and he argues that the way the elementary schools were divided definitely was not right.

According to Roland Cook, "the Malverne school district let segregation go until it was ordered to change by State Education Commissioner James Allen. Allen was hated in Malverne. When he later died in a plane crash, people in the community were actually happy."

Roland Cook was not involved in the school board debates over racial integration, but he remembers that most of the teachers were on the side of the white parents. He feels that "the old-timers were set in their ways" and some of the teachers were openly prejudiced. "During a fire drill, a teacher told one of the Black students to 'shut those thick lips.' When I confronted the teacher, I became very unpopular."

Roland Cook explained that "to promote racial integration, the Woodfield Road school was closed. One of the other elementary schools in the district became a K-3 school. The other was designated for fourth and fifth graders. Sixth grade students were sent to the middle school. Many children were bused to their school. He feels that "one thing that helped the integration movement was the involvement of Black students on school teams. The teams were successful and this built school spirit. Malverne had the first Black basketball team in Nassau County and it always won sportsmanship awards."

For the most part, during this period the mood of the community was very tense. According to Roland Cook, "the Black parents weren't as vocal as the protesting whites. State Senator Norman Lent was from Malverne and he stood firmly with the white majority. He certainly was not a friend of the Black parents. But the Blacks had leaders from CORE and the NAACP. Lincoln Lynch, the head of Nassau CORE was from Malverne. These were interesting and powerful people. The white people feared them."

In 1968, there was a student strike in Malverne High School that was led by both white and Black students. According to Roland Cook, "They had many demands, including a Black studies program." He remembers that they were among the smartest students in the school. "Sal Zaccaro and I went outside because the kids were there and there were no adults present. We got into a confrontation with the police and Sal was arrested. The police broke up a demonstration by the students, arrested them, put them into vans, and took them to Mineola. They began to strip search the kids, even the girls. Sal called the Superintendent. The district sent vans to pick up the students and all charges were dropped. The next year they had the Black studies program and a class in Swahili. The kids went back to being students and pocketed this small victory."

Questions:

- 1- According to Roland Cook, why was there controversy over school integration in Malverne?
- 2- Do you agree with the decision by Roland Cook and Sal Zaccaro to support the striking students? Why or why not?
- 3- If you were a student at Malverne High School at that time, would you have participated in the strike? Explain your reasons.

Sal Zaccaro - Social Studies Teacher, Malverne High School

I started working in Malverne in 1961. I did my student teaching here the year before. When I started teaching it was a mostly white school. There were a handful of Black students, but no Black staff members. Lakeview, however, was in a period of racial transition. White flight had already begun.

I was teaching world history at the time. This included African history the way the Europeans had seen the Africans, as inferiors. The course had nothing to do with Black history, Black culture, Black hopes, or dreams. The kids only got more from me because of my personal interest. I never had any courses in African history in college so I studied it on my own. I found it fascinating.

I was a grade advisor to the class of 1964. A lot of bad things happened at that time in this building. We had a Black student who was a super personality student. One day, I saw him outside my classroom with a very sad face; and this kid was never without a smile. I went out to talk to him. He told me that he had just come from his guidance counselor. The counselor said to him, "So Henry, do you think you would like to be a painter?" Henry had a pretty good view of himself and personal dignity. He said, "No, I'm not really that artistic." But the counselor said, "No, I meant a house painter." The guidance counselor thought he was saying a perfectly innocent thing. This is an example of the low expectations the guidance staff and the district had for Black kids.

That same year, I received a phone call one night from the brother of one of my students. The student, an extraordinary athlete, received many scholarship offers. The brothers told me that the coach was no help with the scholarships. Every time a letter came from a new school, the coach would say, "Oh, take that one, take that one." The young man was confused and didn't know what to do. I advised him to be very careful where he went to school. In 1964, there were very hard racial attitudes in many parts of the country. I told him that he needed to go to a school that would give him extra time, extra courses, would pay for summer school, and would guarantee him a degree. Otherwise, if something happened to his knee, his football and college careers would be over.

Once, when we were fighting to integrate the Malverne schools, I was told that my certification was in doubt. How could that be? I was teaching for a while then. I knew that they were playing dirty. I called the wife of Ewell Finley, the head of the United Committee for Action Now. I wanted to let them know that I was being harassed because of my political views. I later

received a letter from the State Education Commissioner stating that my certification was not at risk and it was permanent. That was some of the dirty tricks that were played.

During the 1960s there was a terrible war going on in Vietnam. People tried to get out of going into the army and they protested against the war. People also protested for civil rights. I was arrested several times in my life for civil disobedience during the Vietnam and civil rights era.

The kids at Malverne got involved in protests because they wanted Black history and Swahili classes. The school board in Malverne was retrogressive about racial issues and any change, so the kids and the school board had a confrontation.

In 1969-70, things got worse. The school board election was racial in every sense of the word. One candidate put out a letter that went to houses in Lynbrook and Malverne, but not to Black families living in Lakeview. It said, "Do you want your kids to go through the dark streets of Lakeview?" I was very active in school affairs. There was an extraordinary African American fellow named Ewell Finley, who was a candidate for the school board, and I supported him.

One day I went to my car and there was paint all over it. Another night I come to my car and it was egged. The night of the election, I found a watermelon in my car with the words "Nigger lover" written in black magic marker. I had to change my phone number twice because people were harassing my family. At the election, a little girl said to me, "We're going to get you now you nigger lover." Right here in this school, and I was a teacher! One woman spit in the face of Mr. Finley. I was standing so close that she got spittle on my face. She said to me, "Why don't you go back to where you came from?"

When the kids became active in the school things got really bad. One day, 139 of us were arrested. The kids were taken to Mineola. They had things done to them that were illegal. At that time, only known drug offenders were strip searched. That wasn't the case with these kids. They were humiliated. Some of the kids told me what happened. They said they were going to tear the place apart. I began to be frightened. I knew that the institutions were much more powerful than they were.

There were two meetings going on that night to discuss what was going on. One was a parents' meeting in a church in Lakeview. Meanwhile, the kids were meeting at Mr. Finley's house. I went to the parent's meeting, but all that was happening was bickering. I didn't want to waste my time so I said that I was going to talk to the kids. One of the parents got offended and said that the kids didn't want to see me. They didn't want to see any adults. So I said fine, they can tell me if they want to.

I went to see the kids. The mood at their meeting was very ugly and I was very scared. I asked them to listen to me for a minute. I told them that some of them could lose their lives if they rioted and that there is no more powerful weapon than silence. I told them to make signs, as they were planning to, and to march on the curb with their parents behind them. They agreed to do it. There really was a good mix of students at the meeting. They were Black and white. The kids had found a common ground.

That night I went home and contacted everyone that I knew in the media because media coverage would protect the students. The next day I stood there with them. I couldn't believe that no other teacher had enough courage to stand up for what is right and stand with these kids. To me that was the greatest betrayal of these kids. How dare they teach these kids and not stand up for them! The kids stood outside the school for three days until the school board met with their representatives.

This was the beginning of a few token changes. However, some horrible things were still done. The principal of the high school wrote letters to colleges where the students who demonstrated had applied. He told the college that these students were troublemakers.

Over the years, more and more Black families moved into Lakeview, and more and more white families moved out. Today, two-thirds of the students in Malverne schools are Black, but two-thirds of the taxpayers and voters are white, so racial conflict continues. We have had school board members and superintendents send their kids to private schools. I bet you didn't know that this district used to be called the Birmingham of the North.

Questions

- 1- Why do you think Malverne was called the Birmingham of the North? Do you agree or disagree with this nickname? Why?
- 2- Do you think the way that the guidance counselor treated the Black student was an example of racism? Explain the reasons for your answer.
- 3- Sal Zaccaro was arrested at a demonstration along with his students. Do you agree or disagree with his actions? Why? Do you think he should have been fired? Why or why not?
- 4- If you were on the Malverne School Board, would you have voted in favor of, or opposed to, classes in Black history and Swahili? Why?
- 5- Imagine you were a high school in Malverne and were attending the planning meeting at Mr. Finley's house. How would you have responded to the statements by Mr. Zaccaro. Why?