

Isadore Ramos

Interview and story by: **Will Thomas** and **Cayce Kenny**

This story is based on one of a series of interviews conducted by South Kingstown (RI) High School students in the Spring of 1998. All of the interviews were focused on recollections of the year 1968. In addition to the students' edited story below, you can find on this site the electronic transcript of the interview and a quicktime recording of the encounter , as well as a table of cues and contents .

" Kill him, Kill him," she says, "get that nigger." She was talking to the kid that I was about to wrestle. Immediately I took my headgear and whipped it at her. It went right by her head. Everybody came out of the stands, ready to riot, until all the wrestlers stood up and halted the [crowd's] aggression. My coach, after the incident, came up to me to talk about my behavior. He said, "You almost caused a riot in here." I said, "I am not taking that from anybody. "

I was born and grew up in East Providence in the 1930's. I am not African American, but the same things affected me that affected them. I was a Cape Verdean, which is a mix of African, Portuguese and a couple of other nationalities. A Cape Verdean could look like a Caucasian with blond hair and blue eyes, and be very, very light skin colored. They could also have my complexion, with dark skin and straight black hair. The Cape Verdean were people of the water, very poor, and had limited opportunity on the islands. Many sailed and did as my grandfather did, immigrating to the United States and making a living as whalers on the Cape and in New Bedford. My grandfather chose Providence because they could just come in here on their boats. That's another difference between us and the African Americans; we came here by choice, not due to slavery and imprisonment.

I was a scholar athlete. I wrestled throughout my college years. I attended the University of Southern Illinois, and I received my Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut. Now being a person of color, I was automatically involved in direct acts of discrimination. I think the first time I witnessed total discrimination was when I was at the University of Southern Illinois. I wasn't allowed to live on campus. On road trips (which we took a lot of, going to away matches), we had to sort of plot our way around the country; you know, where we could eat, where we could sleep. This was not a really big deal for the other colored kids on the team because most of them were from the South, but I had never experienced anything like this in my life.

When I came back to East Providence, I was married with two children. I went to a house with a "For Rent" sign in the window -- now remember I was a great kid, an outstanding athlete, a good student -- everybody knew me in the community. Well, I went to that room and they [said they] had just "rented it out." After that incident I ended up moving to South Providence.

I lived right on Prairie Avenue for two or three years. While living on Prairie, I began to observe all the poor people rioting around me (that's how it was in Providence). Let me just say when I moved to South Providence, I was a street worker, so my interaction was out in the street, not only in Federal Hill, but also in Olneyville, the East Side and all those communities. We had people working in all those various communities and we were intermingling with everyone. So I decided to get involved in the poverty program, "Progress for Providence." My job was working with inner city kids, helping them in school, finding [them] jobs, getting them back in school, and all that good stuff. I was working as a Physical Education teacher at East Providence, and at night I would go out to where the kids would congregate on the corners in South Providence and hang with them. By doing so, I would start gaining their trust and hoped they would open up to me. My avid involvement with the kids led to better things. We opened up community centers and recreation centers so we could get them some counseling or help with employment, or find out what some of their deep problems were. We also had an automotive center where kids could bring their cars to do repairs. So we had set up these areas all over the city of Providence, and it was through these stations, and through hanging out on the street corner with them, that we communicated with the kids.

I think the riots started in 1968 when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. But before then, there were many things people were grumbling about, a lot of social issues. Better jobs, better schooling, and all those kinds of issues. And people were also facing alot of discrimination, so what ended up happening after King's assassination is that people started getting upset and furious. I was involved in the rioting, because I was a street worker. They used to call us the "Soul Patrol," because most of the guys in South Providence working to quell the riot were people of color; so they said, "Soul Patrol." We used to have yellow hats and we'd walk around the streets and talk to people. The only problem was there were policemen on top of buildings shooting at people and I didn't know if I was going to be someone who got shot. To ensure my safety, I had to develop a relationship with the police. I tried to keep the peace and I'm happy with what I accomplished.

I think what young people do is very important. Keep asking questions and striving to find answers. Find out about more people in general, no matter what race, or what ethnic background. It's best to know people, because when you get confined in your own little area, where you don't know what's going on over there, and you go to confront people, you won't know how to deal with them. And it's best that you understand and know what people are about.