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The Record: Civil rights heroine

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THE RECORD

A LITTLE more than a hundred years ago, the intellectual giant and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois reminded Americans of all races of a well-known truth: that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line." Certainly, anyone with a cursory knowledge of the violent turns taken during the civil rights era of the 1950s and '60s can attest to the prescience of Du Bois' words.

Still, as we stand here early in the 21st century, we acknowledge that progress has been made. While we may not have achieved the post-racial America many had hoped for with the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African-American president, small steps forward can be seen, even if in the most subtle of ways.

Take, for instance, the announced retirement last week from the National Basketball Association by Jason Collins. The former Nets player caused an uproar and faced discrimination last season when he became the first active player in one of the nation's four premier professional leagues to come out as openly gay. Collins faced ridicule and bigotry because he was gay, not because he was black.

That in itself is somewhat remarkable given the tortured course of race relations in this country. We were reminded of some of that history last week, with the death of longtime Englewood resident Naomi Rothschild. Her story, as reported by Staff Writer Jay Levin, could be a mini-lesson in social studies for any classroom in Bergen County.

Rothschild, who died Nov. 16, showed that the good, courageous fight for civil rights has been fought by ordinary people of every race. As a student at New York University in the fall of 1940, Rothschild was one of seven students who spearheaded a protest after word spread on campus that a black halfback would be benched for the NYU-Missouri football game because the University of Missouri didn't want him to take the field.

The demonstration on Oct. 18, 1940, drew more than 2,000 students and sympathizers to NYU's administration building. The protesters held signs that read "End Jim Crowism at NYU" and "No Missouri Compromise." In the end, NYU would not be swayed and the player, Leonard Bates, would not travel with the team to play Missouri. The university also struck back against the so-called "Bates Seven" by suspending them.

Of course, Rothschild's story is part of a longer story, an arc that stretches back even to the days of slavery. Those times were recalled last week in Paterson, where a site on the Underground Railroad — a network of passages and safe houses set up to help escaped slaves find refuge and freedom — was recognized with a memorial dedication.

The bronze sculpture at Broadway and Bridge Street pays tribute to Josiah Huntoon, a white merchant who ran a coffee and spice store at the spot before the Civil War, and black abolitionist William Van Rensalier, who was Huntoon's apprentice, business partner and lifelong friend.

Certainly, we recognize that racism and other forms of discrimination are still alive and well in the United States. Yet we can take heart in these stories from recent days, tales of people who spoke and acted out of the courage of their convictions, for the betterment and greater humanity of all.



RECORD FILE PHOTO

Naomi Rothschild

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