

Floyd Stanley

His voice was unmistakable. Although we hadn't talked in several years, I was sure it was him immediately. After establishing that it was really me, he said "I need a favor."

Oh no, I thought. They're foreclosing on the shopping center and he wants my help in arranging another loan. I decided, before his sentence was even finished,— I can't afford the time off, I can't afford the trip to Chicago, and I can't afford the agony of working on that damn shopping center again. I steadied myself to give this friend of 15 years a resolute NO.

"Floyd," I started, "I just can't..." He interrupted, "No, it's nothing like that. I need you to sign a deed. We're refinancing the center with a much better mortgage and you and me are the two names on the original deed. Things go well. I don't need you to do anything except sign the deed."

I suppose my sigh of relief was audible for he then laughed. "Things really are fine," he continued, "but the food store lady is selling her share and we can get much better loan terms." It's truly a miracle, I thought. For once the shopping center is good news. And my mind wandered over a montage of events and people — good and bad — that make up that miracle.

For some, the riots of the late 60's have to be written as history. They, however, remain perpetually fresh for those that experienced them. The riots — particularly April 5, 1968 following Martin Luther King's murder — left the west side of Chicago a barren wasteland. As the community people looked at their situation — in community meetings and informal conversations — there was one constant in their hopes and aspirations; they wanted a local, community-owned shopping center.

We, living in the ghetto as a symbol of dedication, were asked to help. Although our intentions were impeccable, our skills in economic development were lacking. Nevertheless, we said we would help. We all felt that it would be far better to "upgrade" a local Black businessman than import someone who wasn't from the neighborhood. In retrospect, we probably couldn't have gotten anyone to come to the west side, anyway.

So we turned to Floyd, the local barber; Tommie Lee, the local liquor store man and Willie, the local hardware store owner. We told them if they would work side by side with us, we would do everything possible to arrange financing and training to set them up

in a neighborhood shopping center.

Willie didn't last long before he dropped out and Tommie Lee not much longer, but Floyd stuck it out from the very beginning; through all the disappointments and false starts. Floyd was always available to go on appointments — whatever it takes, was his attitude.

It didn't take us long to discover there was no federal loan program for inner city shopping centers (as there was for housing.) We quickly learned that we needed to raise considerable amounts of money to have enough equity to get a bank loan that would be bearable for the shopping center tenants. So we set out to raise the money. There were the original donors and people would step in to help when there was trouble. Over the years, many good people contributed time and money. It always seemed like there were problems, but there were always caring people ready to help.

What made the center a success in the long run was its community base. One story best illustrates this. Conventional shopping center wisdom has it that that our center should have been a "strip center"—one long row of stores. Floyd and the others insisted that it be a mini-mall; that the glass windows of a strip center would be covered by security bars. They were right, of course.

So the center was built; the first locally owned new construction on the west side of Chicago. It was and still is a very attractive building.

And there were problems. At the time, they seemed unending. The curious thing is that I can hardly remember any specific problems now. Because Floyd said something when he called that erased my memory of the shopping center as a problem. When I asked about his family, he proudly rattled off which universities his three kids had gone to or were going to — Michigan State, University of Illinois, and Arkansas, I think. I then understood the real reason for his call, besides signing the deed. He wanted me to know that he, son of a Mississippi sharecropper, had put three kids through college and had another one on the way. At a time when there are more Black men in jail than university, Floyd had put three kids through college!

It makes the shopping center — time, money and problems — well worth it.

Neil Vance
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