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## **Paying the ultimate price for respect**

**By MARIE P. GRADY**

In the minefield that was Mississippi in 1959, Samuel O'Quinn surely knew the price he could pay for speaking out against racism. Yet his voice remained a strong and unwavering force in the civil rights movement - until it was snuffed out in a murder that remains unsolved four decades later.

For O'Quinn, who was shot in the back of the head on Aug. 14, 1959, respect was so important that he was willing to risk injury, harassment and even death for it. A relatively wealthy land-holder who ran a mortician's business and later owned cafes with his wife, he used his time and money to help provide educational opportunities for black children.

I know his story not because it was featured in the classic civil rights book, "Coming of Age in Mississippi," but because his granddaughter told me.

Bea O'Quinn Dewberry is a reporter who covers Springfield City Hall for the Union-News and Sunday Republican. I got a glimpse into her family's past only because she overheard my discussion with another reporter who had quoted someone talking about the "color only line" that used to separate black and white passengers on buses in the South.

I told the reporter I thought the correct term was "colored only" line. I was correct, Bea interjected. She knew this because she had seen the signs herself as a little girl on yearly trips her family made from Springfield to visit her grandmother in Mississippi.

It was her grandmother who stoked the writer's fire in the young girl, whose letters to Mississippi were rewarded with praise and the occasional dollar. It was also her grandparents who used family funds to buy a school bus and pay a driver to help ferry neighborhood children to a better school when public school transportation wasn't available.

If people like Samuel O'Quinn weren't so willing to speak up for the basic need every individual has for respect, I wondered, would Bea and I be having that conversation? If women weren't willing to fight for equal rights, would I be in the position I am in now?

Bea's great-great-grandfather on her father's side was an emigrant from Ireland, a country that fought its own bitter war for respect and independence from Great Britain and which remains partitioned today. Northern Ireland, which remained under British control, is still a cauldron of conflict, but hope burns bright again there after the Irish Republican Army agreed to dismantle its arsenal.

My own grandfather and great-grandfather served in their own way in that effort toward Irish independence, my father used to say. In so doing, they empowered another generation.

Respect is the theme for this month's "Champions of Character" program, a Newspaper in Education effort co-sponsored by this newspaper, the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and WGGB News 40. Profiles of students who demonstrate outstanding character are featured each Monday in this section and on WGGB News 40.

As the stories featured on this page today show, respect is important in so many ways. Yet a lack of respect is still crumbling human relationships, preserving old inequities and dividing nations across the world.

Samuel O'Quinn's efforts did not die with him. One of his 11 children, Bea's father Rance, served as a director of investigations for the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination and is now acting director of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Boston. His granddaughter, whose flair for writing is equaled only by her honesty and respect for others, is no doubt the embodiment of his hopes for future generations.

Most of us have far less at stake than Samuel O'Quinn did. But we are all beneficiaries of the courage owned by all the Samuel O'Quinns of the world. Let's hope we respect the sacrifices they made by striving for lives based on their ideals.

***Marie P. Grady is managing editor of the Union-News and Sunday Republican***