



Celestine Sibley

Sharon Finds a Friend

The near-misses in life are probably the most terrifying thing about it. If you hadn't been at a particular place at a particular time what might have happened to you? If a certain person hadn't seen you and spoken to you at a specific moment, where would you be now? I've had the happenstance aspects of life on my mind a great deal the last few days because of a report which a young writer named Edward Downs Jr. made on the case

of a little Negro girl named Sharon.

Sharon is almost 13 years old and she lives in that area west of the Atlanta stadium called Mechanicsville. Life isn't easy for most people in Mechanicsville and it doesn't seem possible that it could be remotely comfortable for Sharon and her family. There are about 20 of them — 16 children at last count — living in a three and a half room house. Her father, uneducated and untrained for any kind of work, had a poor-paying job until recently but it fizzled out and according to the last report he was on the street looking again.

None of this looks particularly jolly for a little girl but on top of that everybody took it for granted that Sharon was mentally retarded. Her efforts at talk were gibberish. She clearly didn't understand what was said to her. The regular escape from an overcrowded and impoverished home, public school was closed to her.

Then Sharon found a friend.

Mrs. Bernice Miller, mother of three and a former school traffic policewoman, visited Sharon's home as a part of her job as an Economic Opportunity service aide.

The little girl's face attracted her. She could see something was wrong and, with the seemingly boundless optimism of EOA workers, she made up her mind to get Sharon some expert help.

The first thing was a psychological test and then she took Sharon to the Butler Health Center for a physical examination and then, lo and behold, they found the trouble.

Sharon was not mentally retarded but practically stone deaf.

It seems inconceivable that parents or friends wouldn't have caught a handicap like

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that at some point in the little girl's life before she reached her 13th birthday but you don't know how confusing and bewildering life can get for 20 people in three and a half rooms. When the scramble for food is frenzied and there's not enough of anything to go around you might stop paying attention to other troubles.

Sharon has a lot of catching up to do and it isn't going to be easy for a time. But things are looking up. She is getting special attention at the Milton Avenue School, where they concentrate on work with retarded children. She has speech lessons, among others, and can now make herself understood better.

“Sharon still lives at the crowded Mechanicsville address,” Mr. Downs wrote in his report. “But now nearly every day she is at the Sum-Mec (Summerville-Mechanicsville) Center participating in dancing, drawing and elementary writing. Now, too, the gentle black face that was once ignored breaks into a jolly smile when observed.”

Makes it scary when you think that if Economic Opportunity didn't exist, if Mrs. Miller hadn't been there . . . doesn't it?
