

Metro

'Lady in Red' seeks end to OC color barrier

By David Heltz
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Liz Cason, known to many as "The Lady in Red" because of her favorite color, believes it's time to erase the color line in Orange County.

She was appointed to the Orange County Human Relations Commission two weeks ago by Supervisor Don Roth. Cason, who is black, said racism still exists in the county, where she has experienced discrimination in the workplace. She said promotions passed her by for more than 13 years.

Still, Cason radiates enthusiasm. She sits on community boards and organizations all over the county, and her costume always includes a hat — she has more than 100 of them — and an ever-present smile.

She's prim and proper but not pretentious. And she's not worried about maintaining her youthful appearance (at 62, she looks about 40). She's too busy showing everyone that it's what's on the inside that counts.

Born: Aug. 15, 1930

Birthplace: Lake Charles, La. She grew up in Reno, Nev., and moved several times with her husband, a Marine, before the couple settled in Orange County in 1967.

Family: Husband, Parker; daughter, Janvie, 36; and son, Allan, 31

Residence: Anaheim

Education: 1950 graduate of Reno High School; attended Morris Brown College, Atlanta, a college supported by the African Methodist Episcopal Church; and University of Nevada-Reno.

How was the racial climate in Orange County when you came here in the 1960s? "Very hostile. People looked at you as though you were from outer space, as though they had never seen you before. When I took up employment at May Co. at South Coast Plaza, where I was in management, when folks came in and they saw me, and co-workers said, 'Mrs. Cason is our department manager, we'll consult her,' they were really flabbergasted."

There were 66 hate crimes committed against blacks in Orange County in 1992, according to statistics provided by the Orange County Hate Crime Network. Why do hate crimes still occur here? "It exists because residents of Orange County are realizing that we can have an influx of different ethnic backgrounds, and we're not ready for it. Ninety percent of the people of color in Orange County are people



Register file photo

of upper-middle class. That is something some can't deal with. They still have the old Jim Crowism ideas."

Why do you think only 2 percent of Orange County's population is black? "In the early '60s, blacks were truly afraid of coming to Orange County because the (John) Birch Society was very strong here and the white racists were still here."

As a member of the Human Relations Commission, what can you do to improve racial relations and cut the number of hate crimes in the county? "I think I can bring about the attitude that, first of all, we all belong to the human race. There is something we all dislike about ourselves. We need to look at ourselves first and realize that we aren't perfect. There are some things that we don't like about us. If we share truly from the heart about our own personal feelings, and how we have accepted ourselves, we will be able to accept others."

Have you ever been the target of a hate crime or racial slur? "Yes. When I was in management with May Co., I always prided myself in hiring what America is truly like — I had a Native American Indian, I had a Japanese-American, I hired the first Hispanic to work on the sales floor. One day there was a Vietnamese kid who came in. She didn't like what she had bought, so she came back to return it. When she was asked to describe the person who sold it to her, she said, 'It was an American.' When asked what the American looked like, she said, 'I don't know, Americans look like Americans.' So I brought out Debbie, the Native American, and she said: 'Oh no, she's not American.

I mean blond hair, blue eyes.' I asked her if she realized that when you use the term American, because we're all American, you're speaking of Native American. She said, 'You're not an American either, are you?' I considered that a racial slur."

How were your views on racial relations shaped during childhood? "One thing my family always said to me was, 'Remember, you are very special.'"

Do you think that the way people are brought up and where they are brought up have a lot to do with how they look at people who are different from themselves? "Yes. I truly believe that. There are things that are carefully taught in some manner, be it by family, schools, or whatever."

How do you think children growing up in Orange County today will relate to people of different races and cultures 10 years from now? "I can see a change because I can see the difference in the educational system. With the young teachers that are there, they know that the world is made up of many colors. If you would have asked me that when my son and daughter were in school, I would have ... said the hope will have to come from within. I had one of my son's teachers say to me, when he was in parochial school: 'I don't see how Allan could do so well. ... He's the only one who looks like himself here.' I said: 'That is no bearing, sister. He's a human being. If you continue to feel that way, he will always be out of place with you.'"