

Cards in the Spokes  
Storytelling by  
**Andy Offutt Irwin**

Guide for Middle and High School Teachers

SYNOPSIS

Andy was one of the boys on bikes, free wheeling through the hot Southern summers. Johnny and Kenny are Andy's friends, black brothers, together with Andy growing strong and learning how to get around 1960's Georgia. " I had a Vrrrroom motor, but Johnny and Kenny didn't have one, so I took mine off and we all put cards in our spokes."

Through this story, you'll be one of the boys roaming free. At *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors*, you'll be with black and white children in the movie theatre – segregated, yet stuffed together – during a partly live touring matinee. Then hop on your bike with the boys as they pass back and forth across the racial boundaries of the times. The scenery is Southern, but the themes are universal, and the lessons speak straight to the heart.

BACKGROUND

It is certainly well documented that there was inequality between white and black schools before desegregation, but I would argue that the inequality within the newly integrated schools in the 60's and early 70's was even more stark and noticeable. At least in the all-black school, the contrast to a child might not be as vivid as the child's experience of the many ways segregation was being upheld within the integrated school walls.

I was born in Georgia in 1957 to a white family of transitional economic means. The people on my mother's side of the family had been citizens of Newton County for six generations. I started school in the first grade in 1965 at E.L. Ficquett Elementary, Covington's "white" grade school. For several reasons, I was a less-than-mediocre student and in the first of the two years that I spent in fourth

grade, there were five tiers, or *groups*, according to one's academic skills. I was in a lower tier, Group Two. That was the 1968-69 school year, two years after Newton County implemented *Freedom of Choice*, a program whereby parents could send their children to whichever school they chose, regardless of race.

When black children arrived at Ficquett, they were put in the bottom three groups. It could be argued that they had some catching up to do, coming from inferior schools, but in 1970 when true integration began, another *group* was added, making six. That year bottom the two groups were all black, and Group Three was *mostly* black. I began that year –the fifth grade – in Group Three. Later in the spring, I moved up to Group Four. My friend, a black student, Cynthia Banks, followed me up to Group Four shortly thereafter.

A couple of years ago, I ran into Cynthia at the local Post Office. She and I had a wonderful conversation. It was one of those talks when old childhood friends start acting like kids, with the mileage and the wisdom of folks in their forties. I recalled to Cynthia our promotion to Group Four in the fifth grade. She quietly laughed at that memory and told me how her parents had demanded that she be tested in order for her to move up. Cynthia went on to become Student Co-President when we were seniors in the good ol' class of '77. Back then the student body was presided over by a black student and a white student, Co-Presidents who ran for the office(s) as a team.

One of the first black children to enter Ficquett Elementary in 1968 was Johnny Norrington. Johnny and I became fast friends and we rode and raced our bikes together all over town. My mother liked Johnny a lot and supported our friendship. That was a big deal in those days. Sometimes we played together at his house or mine. My parents were divorced so my father wasn't around to forbid our friendship which he certainly would have done if he had known.

This story is based on my friendship with Johnny and his brother, Kenny. Marguerite is a fictional character based on a lot of women that raised me, including my grandmother, who was indeed a recovering racist.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why were the African American students put into the lower school *groups* when they arrived at the formally white schools? What did the white school administration assume about them? How may the school system have provided a “self fulfilling prophecy” for the performance of the black students?

Some prejudice takes place in overt and obvious ways. Some prejudice is subtle. Are there quiet incidences of prejudice today? How may “quiet prejudice” manifest?

In this story, Aunt Marguerite was born in the 1890’s. How do you think she grew up? What was her attitude about race relations? Is she *wise*? Why or why not?

Andy is what some people would call a humorist. Do you think he takes this subject seriously? Why or why not? Can you name other humorists who speak or write about serious issues?

## SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES AND INFORMATION

### Andy Offutt Irwin – Storyteller, Educator, Musician

With his manic Silly Putty voice, astonishing mouth noises, and hilarious stories, he is equal parts mischievous schoolboy and the Marx Brothers, peppered with a touch of the Southern balladeer. Andy is one vibrantly odd bird, with feathers that tease, tickle and tug at the heart - And a whopper of a personality, which barely fits in most rooms. People are drawn to him like magnets to a refrigerator. And inside, it's all Mountain Dew and Jolt Cola.

Andy Offutt Irwin started out as a comedy performer, writer and director with the famous comedy company, *SAK Theatre at Walt Disney World*. Now Andy's work focuses on storytelling and arts education. Andy is a featured teller at the *National Storytelling Festival* and many major storytelling festivals across North America. His storytelling CDs *Southern White Old Lady Hospital*, *Book Every Saturday for a Funeral*, and *Bootsie in Season* have each been awarded the prestigious *Storytelling World Award*. “*Bootsie*” also received *Best Storytelling Album* at the *Just Plain Folks Awards*.

Andy has been the keynote performer/speaker at the *Library of Congress-Viburnum Foundation Family Literacy Workshop*, and has performed and taught workshops at *La Guardia High School for the Performing Arts* in New York City (the “FAME!” school), as well as schools all over the United States, often in conjunction with regional storytelling festivals.

Since 1991, Andy has served as Artist in Residence in Theatre at *Oxford College of Emory University* where he has been the recipient of the *Sammy Clark Award for Exemplary Teaching*.

Andy performs for children and grown-ups all over the country. He is one of the most requested performers for storytelling festivals throughout the United States. His original storytelling theater performances are filled with home grown characters, hilarious escapades and heartfelt relationships that remind audiences of someone THEY know and love.

The attached activities and lesson plans are made available as free web exclusives from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum. These offerings on their website change from time to time.

Teaching Tolerance is a full curriculum for K – 12th students and is available at <http://www.tolerance.org/teach>. This site also offers some free downloads for your classroom though I highly recommend purchasing the entire curriculum for your grade level.

Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. The Southern Poverty Law Center was founded in 1971 as a small civil rights law firm. Today, SPLC is internationally known for its tolerance education programs, its legal victories against white supremacists and its tracking of hate groups (<http://www.splcenter.org/>).

Another excellent website for the study of the civil rights movement, past and present, is The History of Jim Crow, <http://www.jimcrowshistory.org/> .

African-American Cultural Exchange, <http://www.givens.org/k-12.asp>, is an excellent resource for to find and print curriculum units on African American literature, history, culture and social issues for K-12 students.