

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), e22. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000538

Phyllis Palmer, *Living as Equals: How Three White Communities Struggled to Make Interracial Connections during the Civil Rights Era* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008, \$69.95 cloth, \$27.95 paper). Pp. 318. ISBN 978 0 8265 1596 4, 978 0 8265 1597 1.

In *Living as Equals*, Palmer adds to the field of whiteness studies by exploring how demands for human equality issued during the post-World War II civil rights era affected white Americans' conception of race. In separate chapters examining a teen summer camp, a neighborhood organization, and a citywide movement, Palmer considers changing white conceptions of race and white participation in interracial interactions. Whereas other scholars have focussed on political organizations and local movements, or on resistance to black demands for freedom, Palmer seeks to understand the actions of whites who attempted to create sites for egalitarian interracial community and to construct definitions of whiteness free from notions of race-based privilege.

Living as Equals begins by describing Brotherhood Camps coordinated by the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s. Intentionally recruiting Asian American, Latino, African American, and white students from greater Los Angeles, NCCJ camps created safe spaces for teens to build egalitarian interracial relationships, air their beliefs, and experiment with new interactions. In the mid-1960s, camp organizers introduced more explicit discussions of power and encouraged teens to take political action to reduce white domination. Through these activities, organizers believed, white campers would rethink dominant paradigms about race and imagine racial identities not based in white superiority and privilege.

Next the book focusses on the efforts of Neighbors, Inc. (NI) to sustain a mixed-race area in the face of urban renewal, suburban growth, and white flight. In upper northwest DC, black and white families joined in NI to combat residential segregation, fighting for open housing and against blockbusting by realtors. NI was supported by community institutions, such as a conservative synagogue that elected to remain in the neighborhood out of dedication to social equality. A dedicated core maintained NI for more than a decade but white families' commitment to interracial living was increasingly tested by concerns about the quality of the city's mostly black schools.

The last chapters shift to San Antonio, Texas, where residents fought against the economic, political and social disadvantages faced by the city's Mexican American population. Palmer highlights mass mobilization, orchestrated from within Roman Catholic parishes, often with the leadership of Anglo priests, against poverty and for fuller public services and public participation in Mexican American neighborhoods. This is the least satisfying section of the book; the story of San Antonio that Palmer tries to tell is so big that the chapters become diffuse and confusing.

Despite different agendas, methods, and people involved in each effort, Palmer emphasizes some shared aspects of the three attempts to create egalitarian and democratic exchanges. Notably, *Living as Equals* highlights personal transformation, ably using oral-history interviews to chart the intellectual, spiritual and personal

paths that individuals journeyed. The theme of religious faith and the contributions made by religious communities to the construction of new ideas about race and equality also binds the chapters together. Accentuating the formation of interracial communities, *Living as Equals* echoes its subjects' optimism about the possibility of personal transformation to generate political change.

In the end, *Living as Equals* presents an interesting model for understanding the civil rights era. This reader wishes the author had more fully articulated connections and comparisons between the different case studies she presents. By introducing a comparative element to the organizational and community studies that typify much scholarship on this period, however, *Living as Equals* suggests some profitable avenues for further research.

John Nicholas Brown Center, Brown University

ANNE M. VALK