

# THE TOWN THAT SAID "NO" TO RACISM

*Michele and Charles Berkley knew some of their new neighbors didn't welcome them—but they were horrified when their house and car were vandalized. Then, out of all the ugliness, came a little "miracle"*  
By Anne Cassidy

**F**orest Avenue in Cranston, R.I., is lined with tidy houses and trim lawns. It is a street like many others in this peaceful, working-class suburb of Providence. It's also the street where Charles and Michele Berkley bought a house last April.

In most ways theirs seemed an ordinary story of a young, professional, two-career couple—Michele, 34, is a fifth-grade teacher at a private school, and Charles, 33, is a mental-health worker at a nearby hospital—working to make a good home for their three young children, Micah, five; Noah, four; and Asa, two.

But the house they decided to buy is in a white neighborhood, and the Berkleys are black. And—in a scene reminiscent of an earlier decade—some Forest Avenue residents were making it clear they weren't happy about that. Some



A realtor warned Charles Berkley about "neighborhood resistance" to his family's moving into this house. A month later, their new home looked like this.



"The bad strangers have gone, and a lot of people have done something good," Charles and Michele explained to (l.-r.) Asa, two; Micah, five; and Noah, four.

neighbors stopped talking to the house's previous owners when they found out they were selling to a black couple. The neighbors complained to the realtor, who informed the Berkleys of what was politely "neighborhood resistance."

Charles and Michele had felt the sting of prejudice before. Both had experienced discrimination in school, and when Michele was 13 her family was shunned when they moved into a predominantly white suburb in Connecticut. The Berkleys had learned that it never does any good to run away. So in mid-May the couple packed up their belongings and moved from their

South Providence home to 154 Forest Avenue in Cranston.

For the first two weeks things went well. Neighbors were reserved but polite. A few stopped by with housewarming gifts.

Charles and Michele bought a new car and brought it home on June 1, 1988. Michele remembers going to sleep that night full of anticipation for the next day, when she would drive the car to work for the first time. So the first thing she did when she awoke at 5 A.M. was to look out the window.

For a moment, she just stared in horror. Then she said to her half-asleep husband, "Charles, don't get upset, but it looks like somebody painted the cars."

As Charles was getting out of bed, Michele ran downstairs and outside. What she saw was "a nightmare": Both cars, the new one and their old one, had been spray-painted, the tires slashed. The sidewalk and the creamy yellow walls of their house were covered with painted graffiti, some of it obscenities. Someone had sarcastically scrawled the

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Lillian Canavan (left, hugging Michele) was among the Forest Avenue residents who came to express outrage and to help; today, thanks to contributions from neighbors, the Berkleys again feel proud—and safe—in their new home.



## THE TOWN THAT SAID "NO" TO RACISM *continued*

word "Welcome" on the house. "I can't begin to put into words how it felt," Michele remembers. "I felt totally violated. Tears were streaming down my face."

When Charles got outside, the two of them stood silently together, transfixed by the sight, for several minutes. Then they went inside and called the police, who arrived 10 minutes later.

Michele also phoned her family and Charles's, and the local newspaper, *The Providence Journal*. "I wanted everyone to know this had happened," she says. Finally, she called Dee Dee Mesinger, the house's former owner.

Dee Dee had known that some neighbors would be unfriendly, but she was shocked by the damage that had been done. She promised that she would stop by before she went to work. Dee Dee then got on the phone to her friends Peter and Marlene Cady, who live a few doors up from the Berkleys. Marlene rushed over to the Berkleys' house.

She couldn't believe the ugliness of the vandalism. "Peter is at home on vacation this week, so we can help you straighten things up," she told Michele.

Meanwhile, Lillian Canavan, who has lived in the house across the street from the Berkleys' house for 32 years, was awakened at 7 A.M. by a call from

the newspaper. After she answered a reporter's questions and got dressed, she made a pot of chicken soup and took it, with a loaf of Italian bread, to the Berkleys'.

"I know you're probably not going to have a chance to cook tonight," she explained to Michele. Lillian's son, John, who is in a wheelchair, offered to help clean up. "I can't use my legs, but I can use my arms," he said.

These early-morning appearances were the start of a day that gradually erased the ugliness of the preceding night. Neighbors continued to come by to tell the Berkleys how shocked and angry they were. Carmen Ruggieri, who lives next door to the Canavans, went over with her brother to offer to help paint the house.

**T**he reporter from the *Journal* came by, as did television news crews. After the story was reported in the afternoon paper and over radio and TV, people began to arrive from other parts of Cranston as well.

"I'd never seen anything like it," Michele remembers. "It was like a gigantic open house."

Michele and Charles then had to deal with the inevitable questions from their sons: What had happened to the house and cars? And why were all these people here?

"A few strangers came in the night

and did something bad," Charles explained to Micah, Noah, and Asa. "But the bad strangers have gone and today a whole lot of people have come and done something good."

By nighttime, Michele and Charles thought the flood of people had come to an end. But yet another woman—a stranger who didn't give her name—showed up on their doorstep.

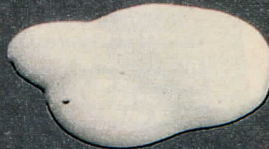
"My husband fought in Vietnam," she told Michele. "During the war someone fire-bombed my car because they didn't like the fact that my husband was fighting there. I know what it means to be violated." Then she handed Michele an envelope and left. When Michele went back inside and opened it, she saw that it contained \$50.

That same evening, an unordered pizza was delivered. In the box was an unsigned card and five \$20 bills. The card read: "Welcome to the neighborhood. Be strong."

The next day, repair work began. Less than 24 hours after the house had been vandalized, the Ocean State Painting and Power Washing Company was cleaning and repainting it—for free. The city sandblasted the graffiti off the sidewalk. And Charles's employer, Butler Hospital, offered to pay for all car repairs. But as the physical traces of the vandalism were wiped away, the emotions it had engendered grew stronger.

"We received enough fruit baskets to

plop. plop. plop. Drop.



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feed an army," Michele says. Alumni from Brown University, the Providence school from which both Charles and Michele had graduated, called. The lieutenant governor and state senators stopped by. Pastors in the area referred to the incident in their sermons.

The Berkleys' phone kept ringing for more than a month after the incident, and the checks and letters kept trickling in. Within that time, most of the more than \$5,000 worth of damage had been repaired. The Berkleys donated excess contributions to a soup kitchen where Charles volunteers.

**W**hat accounted for this extraordinary outpouring of support? Simple anger was motivation enough for David Cicilline, a criminal lawyer in Providence who collected almost \$3,000 to send to the Berkleys. Cicilline, the son of a Jewish mother and an Italian father, said the incident reminded him of past crimes against other minorities. "You just couldn't help but feel sick that someone had put a family through this," he says.

But others—including the Berkleys—realize that many people reacted out of guilt as well. Charles and Michele are aware that the hordes of well-wishers who descended upon their house included people who had initially opposed their moving in.

"[The incident] took the neighbors who were on the fence—who didn't want us to move in—and it made them stop, look across the street, and see us as human beings," Michele says of the vandalism. "It made them think how they would feel if they opened their door one morning to find that someone had destroyed their property."

The previous owners of the Berkleys' house, Dee Dee and Bob Messinger, agree. "I think it's an extremely small minority that had a bad attitude, but the vast majority was in the middle, ready to go whichever way the wind blew," Bob Messinger says. "The wind happened to blow in the right direction."

The fact that Cranston has a small black population may explain why most of the people who called and visited were white. But Michele thinks guilt was a factor in this, too.

"For black people, it's a matter of 'Yes, it was wrong, but life goes on,'" she says. "For whites, it was more personal. It was: 'Wow, these people [the vandals] are reflecting me.'"

The police have not turned up suspects in the case, but in an important way a verdict has already been written. For residents, this has been a time to learn about themselves and others. "I think this made the neighborhood rally together," says Lisa Golde, a college student who grew up on nearby Allen

Avenue. "But it's too bad that something like this had to do it."

Perhaps the very best result is the ripple effect the incident has had well beyond Forest Avenue. Charles works with a prison ministry, and one day a black inmate told him how much he admired the dignity with which Charles and Michele had handled the incident.

"I've had people call me racial names, so I know how much this hurt you," he told Charles. "But to see you practice what you preach made me realize that the next time someone says something to me I don't like, I have to trust God to help me respond."

Has the incident and its aftermath made Forest Avenue a better place to live? Most residents say yes. Could something like it happen again? Again, most people say yes. "We're nowhere near the point in time where race is not an issue," Michele says. "It takes hearts a long time to catch up with the laws of this country."

But one thing is certain: When Charles and Michele think back on that June morning, what they remember is not the slashed tires and the ugly words; it's the voices and faces of the friends they never knew they would have. "To me," says Charles, "it was like a miracle." ★