

THE FIGHTING DENTIST

Errold Collymore was a Black man who grew up in Barbados, British West Indies and came to America in 1912 when he was nineteen. As you can imagine he had to struggle very hard to find a job, put himself through college and then through dental school. He finally made it and started a dental practice in 1923 in White Plains, New York.

In the first few weeks he found that life would not be easy for a Black dentist. He found a small apartment to rent. A white person would have been charged \$30 per month, but a Black person was charged \$80 per month. Black people were forced to live in the worst housing in town, pay the highest rent, and supplying their own heat.

The injustices did not stop with housing. There were no Black policemen or firemen. There were no Black clerical or white-collar workers. Black people were not allowed to swim at the public swimming pool. Black children were often physically abused by school teachers and principals. Black children could not use the YMCA except for a few hours a week.

Dr. Collymore became a "human catalyst" for most of these issues. He challenged the authorities and became a spokesperson for the Black community. Because of him the process of equal rights for minorities was speeded up.

He felt that the most pressing issue was the need for better housing for Blacks and decided on a very daring way to bring this to public attention and to make it an issue that no one could ignore. He and his family decided to move into an all-white neighborhood. In his words "all hell broke loose." A huge seven-foot fiery cross was burned on the front lawn in the middle of the night. The local newspapers carried big bold-type headlines declaring a Black invasion of the Highlands, the name of that all-white neighborhood.

"All sorts of pressure and threats were used to get me out; but I held on. That was 36 years ago. *I am still there!* In the days of the great confusion I laid topsoil all around my house and went about my business of planting lawns and flowers. So much so that a newspaper reporter said in a news item that he was up by my house and I did not seem to be thinking of running away. He saw me up there planting flowers."

Dr. Collymore and his family had integrated the White Plains Community Unitarian Church in 1927. The church gave them strong moral support during the course of the housing struggle. He remained very active in the church until his death in 1972.

In 1956 Dr. Collymore received a human relations award with the following words inscribed on it:

Indomitable champion of his race and pioneer in human relations who has advanced the well-being of our entire community by his vision, courage and faith in the brotherhood of man.