

Tony Parker ©

By Connie J. Schlosberg

His name is Tony Parker. He stands at six-feet tall and is slender and distinguished-looking. The African-American from Gary, Indiana, is youthful in spirit talking with his hands like an evangelical preacher giving a sermon. However, his silver hair that graces his face and the walking cane he uses tells his age. His hot pink shirt stands out from his somber three piece suit. His voice is soft spoken but distinct in tone. He drives a Jaguar, but he eats every day at the mess hall on Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado. He says "You can get an open-faced turkey sandwich with mashed potatoes and peas for \$2.25. Now I ask you, where else can you get all that for \$2.25?" He sits with about forty airmen from different cultures at a long dining table; the only sixty-five year old among them.

Tony is a retired Air Force sergeant who was assigned to the Reconnaissance division right before the Vietnam War started. "My group went into Vietnam to scope out everything before we [The United States] were officially supposed to be there," he says. He relives the first day of enlistment. "After signing up with the Air Force, I was sent to Biloxi, Mississippi. I left with a friend whom I met at the recruitment place," he says. "We took a bus from Gary to Biloxi. The bus dropped us off at the station. We were standing with our luggage at the bus stop in the Mississippi heat." Both waited for a taxi to take them to the base. Taxis kept passing them by, when his friend (who is Caucasian) walked into the street to hail one and show his physical presence thinking nobody could see them. He asked the driver to take them to the base and the driver told him that he could take him but not his friend in the same car at the same time. It dawned on Tony and his friend that being in the south - where segregation was king in the sixties - would be a problem for Tony.

Tony told his friend to go on and he would catch up whenever the next ride was available. He saw a diner nearby and walked in and ordered coffee. The waitress gave him a funny look, but served him anyway. Tony says, "I didn't think much of it at the time." He sat down and received some strange looks from a few patrons seated near him. They were all white people, but at the time, Tony didn't pay any mind to this fact. "Suddenly, I heard a woman calling me from another room," Tony said. "I heard this voice for several more times. I looked toward this room and saw an elderly black lady. She said to me rather sternly, 'Sonny, come over here!'"

He got up and walked over. He noticed about twenty black faces all staring at him from another room. The same lady said, "You can't sit there. You have to come over here and sit." Tony told them where he was from and what he was doing in Mississippi. He felt really unimportant and embarrassed at that moment. He picked up his belongings and his coffee, while the white people stared at him fiercely and sat in what was deemed the "colored section." Tony says, "This was my first introduction to racial segregation. I didn't have that level of mistreatment in Gary." He made it his goal to get an education, one that has reached the doctorate level. He also made it a point that he will never mistreat anyone for who they are. Tony says, "That's why I spend every lunch meal at the mess hall. I go there every day and sit with airmen, black, white, yellow. I don't care. And you know something, they don't care that some old black guy is sitting with them."