

Baby Boomer From Jackson, Miss. Ahead of His Time

By Kate Nichols
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MOBILE, ALA. – Rob Nichols, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, was born in February 1955, a few months before the U.S. Supreme Court passed *Brown vs. Board of Education*. It wasn't until Nichols was in ninth grade, however, that Mississippi executed integration in the public schools.

Everyone knows that growing up is hard; it's just a fact of life. Today's children are growing up in the midst of a pandemic, and people are learning to live in a "new normal." What we forget is that the "old normal" had to be new at some point in time. Growing up in the climax of the Civil Rights Movement was the "old normal" for Rob Nichols.



Rob Nichols (middle) with his parents at Eagle Scout Ceremony. December 20, 1970.

Nichols said, "I've often told friends that when you're living in an apartheid world and you don't realize it's an apartheid world, it feels *normal*." The Nichols Family was in the upper-middle class economic status, and employed two African American women: Elizabeth, the maid, and Mary, the nanny. "My parents treated them respectfully," Nichols explains. "There was just this understanding that they worked for my mom and dad."

Nichols didn't know that his version of "normal" was not the same for families all over the United States. Nichols admits, "As a child I didn't really think about it very much. I didn't understand what was going on in the world around us, outside of Mississippi." But normal was never going to be the same after schools let out for the winter holidays in 1969.

December 1969 was a turning point for Mississippi when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit required the state to integrate the public schools. The impact on the students of Bailey Junior High was monumental, so much so that students did not return from winter break until February 1970. The month of January was more or less lost, and Nichols confesses, "I don't remember that...all I remember is when we went home for Christmas, Bailey was 95% white. When we came back in early February, the ratio of white kids to black kids was roughly 50:50."

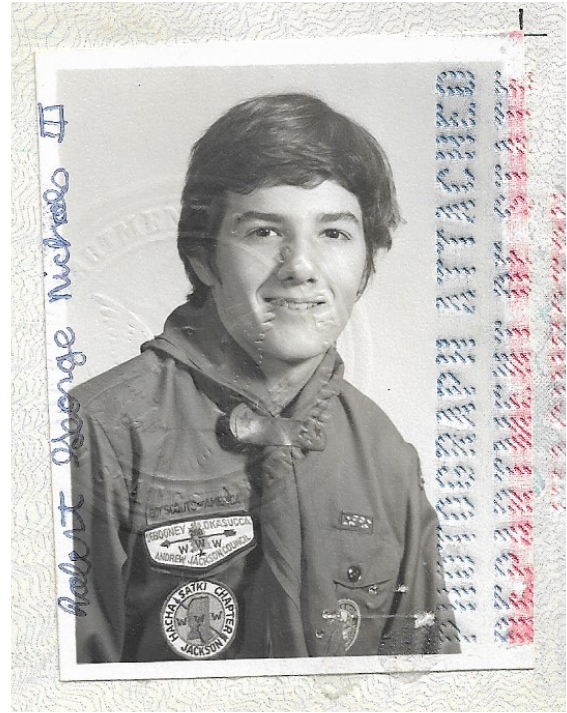
Normal has changed. Nichols was now going to school with more people of color than ever before. A culture shock at first, Nichols began to realize that his new classmates were just

like him: children going to school. Over time, Nichols became good friends with the African American students, but it took time. “We had to grow into it,” Nichols said. “We needed to get to know each other.”

The “white flight” schools of Jackson are a result of Mississippi’s delay in integrating the public school system. Jackson Academy was a long-standing private school in Jackson, and was suddenly overwhelmed with new student enrollment for the spring semester of 1970. The same goes for Jackson Preparatory School as well as St. Andrew’s Episcopal School.

Nichols was given a choice of school by his father: military school, Murrah High School, the biggest public school or St. Andrew’s. Nichols went to public school by choice, whereas most kids went to public school because they were either a person of color or not financially capable. “I had no desire to go to private school,” Nichols says with confidence. “I’d always wanted to go Murrah. I didn’t think about it very much, I just made a choice.” Rob Nichols graduated from Murrah High School as a member of the Class of 1973. Nichols’ three younger sisters attended and graduated from St. Andrew’s.

That was Rob Nichols’ “new normal.” A radical decision for the time, and a strong testament to his character. Mississippi may have been 14 years behind the rest of the country, but Nichols was 50 years ahead of everyone.



Rob Nichols’ passport photo from a trip to Japan for the Boy Scout World Jamboree, 1971