

---

C H A P T E R

1

---

# Our Worst Hour

---

**O**n December 30, 1991, Christina Ridgeway, a student at Gunderson High School, left a symposium about college life sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and San Jose State University. The senior was looking forward to attending college and felt energized by the discussions she'd been part of at the gathering. She and a group of other high school and college students talked until the early hours of the morning, then decided to grab a bite to eat at the local Denny's restaurant.

One of the group, Eddie Lamont Jones, already in college at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, was home for Christmas break and had attended the seminar at the San Jose Hyatt to help out. He and three of his friends were among the first of the group to arrive at the Denny's on Blossom Hill Road at about 1 A.M. When Jones approached the manager to let

## 2 The Denny's Story

the staff know that their group was larger than usual, that was when Jones said their troubles began.

Even before seating the gathering group of students, Ridgeway, Jones, and others would claim, the manager began announcing the restaurant's prepayment policy and its \$2 cover charge in what the students described as a loud, even hostile voice. Ridgeway, Jones, and the other teenagers said they were told stories about other groups that had left the restaurant without paying, and that when they asked to see a copy of the manager's stated policy, he refused.

Ridgeway later said that she was suspicious of the manager's claims and noticed several of her other friends—all of them white—seated in another part of the restaurant enjoying their meal. She said that when she approached that group and asked whether they had to prepay, they reacted with surprise. No one had asked them to pay in advance, they told her. Ridgeway said that while Jones and the other members of her group continued to wait, she approached the manager again and asked whether breaking up into smaller groups would solve his problem with them. She said the manager refused to budge, and in the end, they left without eating—but with painful memories. She would later describe herself in a newspaper account as humiliated and angry. “He violated my rights not only as a black person but also as a teenager.”

### **“This Just Broke Me...”**

It was late December of 1992, about 11:30 P.M., and Leon Youngblood was tired. On his way home from a business trip in San Diego, the young customer service representative for Pacific Bell decided to stop in Costa Mesa, California, for a

late-night meal at Denny's on 17th Street. He stood in line at the hostess podium, waiting with a dozen other customers for a table. He watched as patron after patron was seated and noted with dismay that he was the only black person among the group. Finally, after 15 minutes of waiting, he asked employees standing nearby to seat him. But, as Youngblood later remembered, the employees only laughed at him.

Eventually, Youngblood seated himself, but he soon found that his ordeal was not over. As he tells the story, more time passed without attention from a single employee. While he watched, white patrons entered the restaurant, were immediately seated, and received both menus and food. When he confronted an employee and asked why no one would help him, Youngblood says he was told to call Denny's 800 number if he had a complaint.

In an interview with a reporter from the *San Diego Union Tribune*, Youngblood told reporter Leslie Wolf that he asked to see a manager and was told she was on break. When he requested the use of a pen to write down the toll-free number, "the employee said, 'You want to use my pen, you better say please.'" Frustrated and hurt, Youngblood left the restaurant but says the memories linger.

"I've never cried before, except at funerals, but this just broke me," he said in the newspaper article. He added that ever since his experience in a Costa Mesa Denny's, going to restaurants has made him nervous.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a happy family group that drove to a Denny's in San Diego on the evening of November 16, 1991. The 11 adults and 2 children comprising the Maxwell family had just returned from a football game at San Diego State

#### 4 The Denny's Story

University, and it was dinnertime. But when they arrived at the restaurant, they waited 30 minutes for a hostess to seat them, according to accounts from family members. Even then, the hostess seated only half their party, leaving the remainder of the Maxwell family to stand for an additional half hour. Once the rest of the group was seated, they were placed at a table far away from the rest of their family members, they said.

Once a server finally arrived to take their order, the Maxwells reported that they were asked to prepay for their meals and said they were told they could not be served until they prepaid. Demetrice Maxwell rose from her seat and approached the smaller table where other family members were seated. When she discovered that group had not been asked to prepay, she confronted the manager—who told Mrs. Maxwell that the server had indeed made a mistake: Her entire family should have been asked to prepay.

Her curiosity aroused, Mrs. Maxwell asked other customers—white customers—whether they had been asked to pay for their meals in advance. According to Mrs. Maxwell, not one of the white customers had been asked to pay first and eat later. When she pressed the manager to explain the policy, she was told that college students often came to the restaurant, ate their meals, and left without paying. Yet Mrs. Maxwell claimed that in her informal survey of college students at the Denny's restaurant, not a single white student had been asked to pay before eating.

#### **“Her First Day as a Teenager”**

December 11, 1991, was Rachel Thompson's thirteenth birthday, and all the teenager wanted for dinner was waffles

and an ice cream sundae at the local Denny's. So Susan and Danny Thompson took Rachel, along with their two other children, Jason and Danny Jr., to a Denny's restaurant in Vallejo, California. The couple brought along Rachel's baptismal certificate as proof of her birthdate, to take advantage of Denny's popular promotion of a complimentary meal on the customer's birthday.

The restaurant was almost empty when the Thompsons arrived, yet it seemed to them that the server took an inordinate amount of time to approach their table. The Thompsons later said that the server who came to their table quickly spoiled their festive mood, refusing to say hello or otherwise greet them politely. Instead, she demanded to know what the group wanted to eat. The family might have ignored her behavior or chalked it up to a bad day, they said. But when they told the woman that it was Rachel's birthday and that she was entitled to a free meal, the Thompsons claimed her already unfriendly attitude became markedly colder. As they presented their daughter's baptismal certificate, family members said that she ignored the document and stormed off to get her manager's approval.

The server returned to the Thompsons' table with her manager, but the family said the situation didn't improve—in fact, it seemed to escalate. When the manager asked whether they had any proof that it was Rachel's birthday, Mrs. Thompson again presented her daughter's baptismal certificate, but the manager refused to take the certificate from her hand. She later recalled that the man told her that the baptismal certificate wasn't acceptable but that he could accept Rachel's school identification. Yet when Rachel produced the requested identification, the manager rejected it,

according to the Thompson family, and asked again to inspect the baptismal certificate.

Mrs. Thompson remembered sliding the certificate across the barren restaurant table, only to have the manager rebuke her for throwing things at him. As the family watched in growing dismay, the manager began shouting at the mother. Finally, the family left the restaurant, their birthday party spoiled and, as they later said, their illusions shattered. Even years later, the Thompsons' anger and hurt were palpable.

"I was angry, outraged at what happened," Susan said in interviews. "I felt insulted. You have to have lived it to know how it felt. ... The pain [was] too great, especially on my daughter's thirteenth birthday, her first day as a teenager."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the morning of April 1, 1993, 21 Secret Service agents reported for roll call at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. It was 6:30 in the morning, and President Bill Clinton, the focus of their assignment that day, was set to arrive at noon in Annapolis, Maryland, 30 miles away. The president had scheduled a visit to the United States Naval Academy; the detail assembled at Andrews would be responsible for a variety of tasks necessary to ensure the safety of the president. At roll call, the advance officer notified the officers assigned to the magnetometer detail that their metal-detecting equipment, designed to screen people attending presidential functions, would need to be fully operational by 9:30 A.M. in order to handle the crush of reporters and cadets expected to attend the event. Still, the detail determined that they had an hour to get breakfast, reach the naval academy, and set up their equipment in

time. It made sense for the men to stop at a Denny's restaurant on West Street, not far from the academy itself.

As the agents remember it, the room wasn't crowded at all, and the hostess directed all the officers to the same section of the restaurant, allowing them to spread out among several booths and tables nearby. Among those 21 men were 7 African-Americans; six of them—Alfonso Dyson, Melvin Fowlkes, Merrill Hodge, Joseph James, Leroy Snyder, and Robin Thompson—sat at a table together. The remaining men, including one Latino and one African-American man, sat elsewhere. The men made a striking picture as they took their places at the restaurant tables, all dressed in the Secret Service uniform common to a presidential detail: black shoes, black pants with wide gold stripes on the outside, white shirts with narrow black ties, gold badges, gun belts—and the official seal of the president of the United States.

Like all Denny's restaurants in that period, the restaurant was participating in one of the company's most popular promotions: the All-You-Can-Eat Breakfast. Customers chose five items from the menu and could eat all they wanted for a fixed price. Unlike many restaurants that offer a similar meal in a buffet setting, Denny's restaurants offered the meal cooked to order.

Many of the agents ordered the All-You-Can-Eat Breakfast. But no matter what the order, it became obvious after 30 minutes that the table with black officers was completely without food, whereas the other officers already were eating. One of the black agents, Robin Thompson, said he twice approached the server to inquire about their meals and was told to wait. After Thompson's inquiry, one of his colleagues, a white officer sitting at a booth right next to the six black agents, noticed the face of the server as she left the table. This officer, William Winans, said later that

the woman rolled her eyes as she walked away from Thompson.

By this time, the black members of the magnetometer detail had been waiting 45 minutes for food, according to accounts they gave later. As they reported, they watched as patrons who entered a half an hour later than they did were served and were eating their meals even as the six men continued to wait. Not only did their nonblack colleagues report having been served promptly but several also said they had been served second helpings of their meals.

Finally, Thompson told the server that he wanted to see the restaurant manager. Meanwhile, the agents had consulted with their supervisor, James Sobers, who advised them to file a complaint against the restaurant, since there was nothing left to do given their schedule. Just as the six hungry men prepared to leave the restaurant, the server was said to have returned to their table with only one of their orders, which they were unable to eat. At about the same time, the manager approached the agents; they asked him for the name and address of Denny's regional management office. But the agents claim the manager made the mistake of giving them the address not of Denny's corporate offices but of the restaurant itself. Because the manager's native language was not English, he might have misunderstood the agents' request. Whatever the reason, the agents said they finally acquired the address of the restaurant's corporate headquarters only because of a Maryland restaurant license tucked into the window of the restaurant. Along the way, the six black men stopped for some fast food from a nearby Roy Rogers restaurant, then proceeded to the naval academy and their assignment.

"I didn't want to believe it was discrimination," Alfonso Dyson would say later. "I'm not one to cry discrimination;

it's not in my blood. But I couldn't think of what else it would be."

### **No Laughing Matter**

Whatever else "it" turned out to be, these stories—and dozens more like them—would become a litany. They would be repeated in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television shows, across the United States and around the world. Cartoonists would sketch out their sarcastic takes on the corporate racism of Denny's restaurants. Comedians from Jay Leno to Arsenio Hall would make joke after joke in their opening monologues.

"Denny's is offering a new sandwich called the Discriminator," Leno said one night in May 1993. "It's a hamburger, and you order it, then they don't serve it to you."

Later that month, during the NBA finals, Leno joked about a news story that reported Chicago Bulls player Michael Jordan being sighted in public at 3 A.M. the night before the game. Leno said that though Jordan had planned to go home early, "he'd stopped for dinner at Denny's at about 6 P.M., but no one ever came to take his order."

The combination of hundreds of complaints, a growing number of lawsuits, and relentless publicity had turned Denny's restaurants, one of the country's largest restaurant chains, into what one person called "a poster child for racism." Like many other Americans, I was aware of the troubles at Denny's—and more than a little grateful that they weren't my troubles. From my distant vantage point as CEO of Burger King Corporation, it appeared that Denny's would have an extraordinary amount of work to do to combat the miserable image it had as a racist company. The

most important thing it would have to do, I figured, would be to make sure whatever changes they planned to make were not just cosmetic ones. They'd have to change the culture of the company itself to keep allegations of racism and discrimination permanently at bay.

I couldn't really say I was sorry about not having to face such a massive job. Some of the work I imagined needed to be done, I would learn later, already was beginning at Denny's. No one could have told me that, in a few years, I would be the man assembling a team of people from across the country to tackle this daunting task. These men and women, along with me, would be the architects of the change that would move Denny's from being the butt of jokes to being a model for inclusion. For a long while, it would be a bumpy ride.