

Blue-Eyes, Brown-Eyes:
The Experiment that Shocked the Nation
And Turned a Town Against its Most Famous Daughter

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On the evening of April 4, 1968, when schoolteacher Jane Elliott flipped on her television, she didn't expect much. The pickings were slim that Thursday — Ironside or Bewitched. Instead, though, all Jane found were news bulletins — grainy black-and-white pictures of a motel terrace with metal latticework and a newscaster who said something about a shooting in Memphis. Jane got close to the set and stared. Someone had just killed Martin Luther King, Jr.

There was a flurry of news reports from New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, then back to Memphis. A white reporter was sticking a microphone into the face of a black leader, tears streaming down his cheeks, and Jane remembers the reporter asking, "When our leader was killed several years ago, his widow held us together. Who's going to control your people?"

What was this "our leader" and "your people" nonsense? Hadn't John F. Kennedy been the leader of black Americans, too? Didn't white Americans share outrage at King's death just as much as black Americans did?

And, then, it happened — an epiphany, in Jane Elliott's Riceville, Iowa, living room that evening, flipping between channels. Tomorrow in her third-grade classroom, she'd combine a lesson from the Indian Unit, when she held class in a tee-pee, with a lesson from February's Hero of the Month, when her kids had studied Dr. King. To link the two lessons, Jane would throw in the Indian maxim she had had her students memorize — "Oh, Great Spirit, keep me from ever judging a man until I have walked a mile in his moccasins."

In her head, the plan sounded simple, even elementary. *These kids were elementary-school kids, after all, so why shouldn't it work?* If Jane had to explain the lesson she was concocting, it would go something like this:

The Indian saying about walking a mile in someone else's moccasins — well, her 8-year-old kids from rural Iowa had never met a black person. If their *parents* had ever talked to a black person, Jane would be surprised. It hadn't been until Jane herself was 19 until she saw a black person. Jane

recalled reading in the novel *Mila 18* by Leon Uris something about how the Nazis had used eye color to determine which prisoners would live or die. Those with blue eyes were good and pure; people with brown eyes were inferior and filthy, scourges to be destroyed.

In that blinding instant in her house at the corner of Eighth and Pine as dusk folded into night, Jane came up with her own blue-eyes, brown-eyes experiment. Tomorrow in class, she'd separate her students by eye color. The blue-eyed kids wouldn't be allowed second lunch helpings. The blueys, as she would call them, wouldn't be allowed to play on the new jungle gym. The brown-eyed children would get five extra minutes at recess. Jane would praise the brown-eyed kids as hard-working, thoughtful, dependable and honest. She'd clap them on their backs, offering encouragement. She'd instruct the brown-eyed children that they shouldn't associate with blue-eyed children, even if they were friends. The blue-eyed children, Jane would say, were dirty.

Jane always pushed the limits. She liked to challenge her kids, to get inside the crevices of their porous, squishy brains. This time, though, Jane would go further. She'd tell her students that the pigment in their eyes, which made for the color of their irises, indicated intelligence. She'd say that kids with blue eyes didn't have the same sized brains as the brownies. Blueys shouldn't even think about doing their homework, she'd say, because no matter how hard they'd try, they wouldn't be able to get it. That the blueys couldn't do it really wasn't their fault. It was just how blueys are.

Jane would add a kicker: Even if the blueys could finish their homework, Jane would tell them that besides getting the answers wrong, the blueys would forget to hand in their assignments. She'd say that the kids with blue eyes were shifty, lazy, and dishonest. You couldn't depend on them. But that, too, wasn't their fault. That's just how blueys are.

For her exercise to work, Jane knew that she couldn't tell her students that she was making all this up. To tell them that would ruin the exercise. Jane's kids lionized her. If Jane told them to lasso the moon, they'd hunt for twine in their dads' barns and throw it as high as they could. So that her students knew how serious Jane was, she'd hand out crepe-paper armbands and make each blue-eyed child wear one.

Steven Armstrong was the first student to set foot in Classroom 10 that Friday morning, April 5, 1968.

“Hey, Mrs. Elliott,” Steven yelled as he slung his books on his desk. “They shot that King yesterday! Why’d they shoot that King?”

Jane said they’d get into that when the rest of the children arrived. By 8:25 a.m., more students straggled in, Debbie Hughes, Alan Moss, Jeanette Goodale, Julie Kleckner, Debbie Anderson, and by 8:30, all 28 students had found their desks. After the usual clatter of books, notebooks, pens and pencils falling into the right or wrong places, the squeal of sneakers skidding and Mary Janes slipping, cotton dresses and chino pants sliding (and snagging) against wooden desks with gum-encrusted undersides, Jane said she had something special for the day. And it wouldn’t involve spelling, multiplication tables or learning cursive!

This was going to be one of Mrs. Elliott’s great days off. Even if “something special” meant traipsing back to the old-age home and baking cookies, well, that would be fine, too. Perhaps Jane would bring back Pizzui, the invisible gremlin who crept around the room, stealing students’ homework and mysteriously turning the lights on and off. (“Who opened that window?” “Must have been Pizzui!”) These innocent kids didn’t have a clue about what was about to happen, that Classroom 10 would turn into a place of terror for the next six hours.

Jane asked her students what they knew about Negroes. There was a pause, then without much prodding from Jane came an onslaught. Negroes were dumb, they didn’t bathe, they had a hard time keeping jobs. The students mentioned these traits matter-of-factly, without a trace of malice as though they were reciting what they had eaten for dinner.

“How do you think it would feel to be a Negro boy or girl?” Jane asked, her teacher-eyes widening on cue. “It would be hard to know, wouldn’t it, unless we actually experienced discrimination ourselves.” Jane pulled out the armbands and asked each of the blue-eyed kids to wear one. “Would you like to find out?”

A chorus of “Yeah!” went up. Jane took a deep breath, and went to work. Seventeen blue-eyed children were set apart from eight children with brown eyes and three with green eyes.

“The brown-eyed people are the better people in this room,” Jane started. “They are cleaner and they are smarter.”

“Aw, they *are* not,” Alan Moss said, maybe more to break the silence than for anything else.

““Oh, yes, they are,” Jane intoned, making eye contact with each student. “Brown-eyed people are smarter than blue-eyed people.”

Even though they hung on her every word, Jane knew instinctively that the children weren’t going to buy her pitch unless she came up with a reason, the more “scientific” to these space-age children of the sixties, the better.

“Eye color, hair color and skin color are caused by a chemical,” Jane proclaimed, picking up a stick of chalk and writing in large block letters MELANIN on the blackboard. Jane knew the moment she touched the chalk to the slate board her comments would become official. That sound of contact made what she was saying real. Melanin, Jane lectured, is what causes intelligence. The more melanin, the darker the person — and the smarter the person. “Brown-eyed people have more of that chemical in their eyes, so brown-eyed people are better than those with blue eyes,” Jane said. “Blue-eyed people sit around and do nothing. You give them something nice and they just wreck it.”

There were uneasy stares and within seconds Jane realized that a palpable change had overtaken her students. Jane saw an immediate chasm dividing the blue-eyed kids from the rest. Jane was poised to make that chasm as wide as her kids would allow. ”Do blue-eyed people remember what they’ve been taught? Jane asked, and automatically, the brown-eyed kids responded “No!” Jane rattled off the list of rules for the day, which included the requirement that blue-eyed kids use paper cups if they insisted on drinking from the water fountain.

“Why,” brown-eyed Debbie Anderson asked haltingly.

“Because we might catch something,” came the swift response from Ricky Ring.

Everyone looked towards Mrs. Elliott, and all Jane had to do was nod her head, so it must be true.

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If eyes (no matter what color they are) are windows to the mind, then Jane Elliott had given herself the ultimate power of looking into 28 souls that day. She wasn't quite sure what she had unleashed. The empowered brown-eyes kids proceeded to berate their blue-eyed classmates. They were merciless. "Well, what do you expect from him, Mrs. Elliott," one brown-eyed student said as a blue-eyed student got an arithmetic problem wrong. "He's a bluey!"

Jane knew it was just a matter of minutes before her kids would make her, and she braced for what was to come.

“Hey, Mrs. Elliott, how come you’re the teacher if you’ve got blue eyes?” one brown-eyed boy asked.

But before Jane could answer, Steven Knode jumped in. “If she didn’t have blue eyes, she’d be the principal or the superintendent.”

With that out of the way, Jane pulled down the roller wall map of the world to show how much larger the continent of Africa was than the United States. Just as Jane pulled on the metal clasp, it slipped out of her fingers and the map spun around on the roller, making the flapping sound that everyone who has ever attended elementary school (prior to PowerPoint lectures) knows. “Well, I’ve done it again,” Jane said as much to herself as to her kids.

“Whaddaya expect?” Debbie Hughes piped up. “You got blue eyes, haven’t ya?”

Shaken and dazed after just three hours, Jane staggered to the Teacher’s Lounge for lunch. Jane was ready to call the whole thing off, chalking up the experiment as too risky. Who knew where it would end? Thirty-four-year-old Jane asked the other teachers, women in their fifties and sixties, what they were doing to bring the news of the King assassination into their classrooms.

“Something happened last night?” seemed to be the collective response, Jane recalls. She could hardly contain herself, and she bubbled forth with what she called her “exercise.” She described over egg-salad and bologna sandwiches and pop and rhubarb pie how she had split her class into two, how she had told the blue-eyed kids that were inferior and how several of her slower kids with brown eyes, when given this added boost, had transformed themselves into confident leaders of the class. The most withdrawn brown-eyed kids had suddenly become outgoing. Some were beaming with the widest smiles she had ever seen on them. When several of the brown-eyed kids who had problems reading went to their primer that morning, they whizzed through sentences — all at the expense of the sad blue-eyed kids whose sullen faces just about reached the floor.

There was silence in the Teacher’s Lounge. Jane couldn’t believe what she wasn’t hearing. No compliments, no raves for her innovation, not even a rebuke. Instead, this is what Jane recalls one teacher saying: “I don’t know why you’re doing that. I thought it was about time someone shot that son of a bitch.”

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Even if she wanted to stop her experiment, when Jane got back to her classroom, it had taken on a life of its own. A smart blue-eyed girl, who had never had problems with her multiplication tables, started making all kinds of mistakes. Jane noticed the student stumbling when she read aloud. When she walked across the room, Jane saw that she now slumped. During afternoon recess, the girl came running back to Room 10, sobbing. Three brown-eyed girls had ganged up on her, and one had hit her, warning, “You better apologize to us for getting in our way because we’re better than you are.”

That was bad enough, but the kicker came when the blue-eyed girl apologized to the trio of bullies!

When Monday came around, Jane reversed her exercise. This time the brown-eyed kids were told how shifty, dumb, and lazy they were. And the same things happened as had happened Friday, but Jane noticed a profound difference. This time, the blueys were much less vicious. The blue-eyed children had seen the cost of their aggressors’ behavior, and weren’t willing to duplicate it.

At 2:30 that Monday afternoon, Jane told the brown-eyed kids to remove their armbands, and what she witnessed she has never forgotten. Kids hugging one another, some grinning, others crying. Jane talked passionately about what they had all gone through. When Jane reminded the children that the impetus for the lesson had been the King assassination, one of them asked if Dr. King had any children, and when Jane said he had four, she sensed the students were thinking about how they would have felt if their fathers had been shot and killed (and not in an hunting accident, but the result of skin color). Jane suggested writing to Dr. King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, which they did Tuesday.

Jane then asked her students if they wouldn’t mind writing compositions about the experiment. After Sindee Hockens, Ricky Sletten, and Jeanette Goodale frowned, Jane said she thought it important to put down their thoughts.

Jane and her mother read the essays over lunch the next day, and that afternoon, Jane’s mother shared them with the editor of the *Riceville Recorder*, who said he’d like to print the compositions in the weekly newspaper, which he did on Page 4 in the April 18, 1968 edition under the headline, “How Discrimination Feels.”

One of the less exciting jobs for clerks in every Associated Press office is to read that region's newspapers, and the collection of essays that had appeared in the *Riceville Recorder* must have intrigued a nameless clerk in the Des Moines AP office enough to write a curious 17-paragraph story, which the AP moved on its national wire. The article quoted Jane as saying that the exercise's results were "absolutely frightening. I was sick. I was simply dumbfounded" with how effective the experiment had been. "I think these children walked in a colored child's moccasins for a day," was how the AP article ended.

At 1:30 p.m. on May 23 Principal Leonard Crawford's secretary called Jane on the school intercom and asked her to come quickly to the main office, something about a long-distance phone call.

"Maybe it's Coretta Scott King!" Julie Kleckner announced. "Maybe she's thanking us for the note we sent her!"

When Jane got to the main office and picked up the phone, the man on the other end identified himself as Johnny Carson. "We'd like you to come on the show," Carson asked a flabbergasted Jane, who had never before been on an airplane and had only several times left Iowa.

Jane flipped on the intercom speaker, and told her students that the caller hadn't been Coretta Scott King. An immediate groan followed. She paused, then announced with fanfare, "But it was Johnny Carson!"

"Who's he?" everyone asked when Jane got back to Room 10.

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Jane was the warm-up act to the show's main attraction, actor James Garner. Carson broke the ice by playing up Jane's Iowa roots. "I understand this is the first time you've flown?" Carson asked, grinning.

"On an airplane, it is," Jane said to gathering gales of laughter from the audience.

The rest of the interview flashed by in a whiz. Jane went over the experiment, and after Carson broke for a commercial, she was whisked off the show. But Jane's singular message on May 31, 1968 came across loud and clear to millions of television-watching night owls. And their reaction was instant. Seldom in the history of NBC had more people called to protest a show. The switchboard lit up, as newspaper columnists are wont to write, "like a Christmas tree." NBC logged

hundreds of callers aghast that this mild-mannered teacher could have devised such a monster experiment. One woman wrote Jane, saying, “How dare you try this cruel experiment out on white children. Black children grow up accustomed to such behavior, but white children, there’s no way they could possibly understand it. It’s cruel to white children and will cause them great psychological damage.”

Which was the point. “Why are we so worried about the fragile egos of white children who experience a couple of hours of made-up racism one day when blacks experience real racism every day of their lives?” Jane snorted in a reply.

On December 15, 1970, Jane performed the experiment for educators at a White House Conference on Children and Youth. (When she got the invitation and told Superintendent Donald Johnson that she’d been invited to the White House, he asked, “*Whose* white house? You mean someone in Riceville?”) This time Jane staged the exercise for adults, and once again, it caused a colossal uproar.

Jane came back to Riceville invigorated, flushed with confidence for her exercise. Jane was stubborn, everyone knew that, but few figured she would continue bullheaded with something that had nothing to do with the three R’s. Once yes, but every year? Had Jane gone off her rocker? She went ahead and proceeded with the exercise whether her students asked for it or not. Observers on the outside might think that the exercise must have lacked power and surprise each succeeding year, but if anything, Jane and how she conducted her experiment gathered momentum and steamrolled hundreds more Riceville students.

A Peabody Award-winning film called *The Eye of the Storm* about the exercise was broadcast on ABC in 1971, which further propelled Jane onto the national agenda. Two books followed, *A Class Divided* and *A Class Divided: Then and Now* by William Peters. Despite a constant rain of threats, Jane continued to conduct the exercise until 1984 when under fire she quit her job. With just a few modifications, she has brought the same exercise to millions worldwide. She has led training sessions at corporations, including General Electric, Exxon, AT&T, IBM and Wal-Mart, and has lectured to the FBI, IRS, US Navy, US Department of Education and US Postal Service, as well as at more than 350 colleges and universities. She has appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

four times. On the lecture circuit worldwide, Jane estimates more than 600,000 adults have been exposed to her exercise.

All this from a woman who has no formal training in psychology (she received her bachelor's degree in teaching from Northern Iowa University in 1980 when she was 46 years old). In the 2003 textbook *American Education: A History*, written by professors Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jane is listed alongside Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Horace Mann, Booker T. Washington, Maria Montessori and 22 others as the world's most significant educators. Stanford psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo, the author of the standard psychology textbook that thousands of college students use today, writes this about Jane in his text, *Psychology and Life*:

One of the most effective demonstrations of how easily prejudiced attitudes may be formed and how arbitrary and illogical they can be comes from the class of a third-grade school-teacher in Riceville, Iowa. The teacher, Jane Elliott, wanted to provide her students from this all-white rural community with the experience of prejudice and discrimination in order to draw from it the implications of its seductive appeal and devastating consequences. To do so, she devised a most remarkable experiment, more compelling than any done by professional psychologists.

Two decades after Jane quit teaching in Riceville, wounds in this rural pocket of America are raw when it comes to her. Time hasn't healed these wounds; lesions in Riceville have been festering so long that today they're toxic. To many in Riceville, Jane Elliott put a pox on the town, just as Lee Harvey Oswald did to Dallas five years before Jane started experimenting on Riceville children. Riceville residents mention her name in hushed tones; dozens of people I talked to chose not even to say her name — too painful, too much a reminder of an era they want never to have existed. Interviews with many of the retired teachers who worked with Jane show a deep rancor. Fourth-generation Riceville resident Jane Elliott is detested by residents as an arrogant, self-centered opportunist who turned against her town and inflicted untold harm on hundreds of Riceville's children.

Few of those critics, though, ever stepped inside Jane's classroom. More than 450 Riceville students went through her exercise from 1968 – 1984, and today many say that Jane Elliott is hero, a teacher extraordinaire whose simple experiment, which lasted just two days, forever changed their lives.

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Until I met Jane Elliott last August, she hadn't been back to Riceville for more than a dozen years. In 1972, she and her husband, Darald, moved to a converted schoolhouse in nearby Osage, 18 miles away. Jane had too much baggage to stay in Riceville, too many people talked about her behind her back, too many people never forgave her for the indelible black eye they say she gave Riceville. Towns in rural Iowa are wholly separate entities. Eighteen miles might as well be 1,800 miles.

"Jane," I said after our first round of conversation. "Let's take a drive to Riceville."

Her blue eyes stared at me, big as Sacagawea dollars, and for a flash I felt myself traveling back in time, 36 years earlier, the tables now turned. Perhaps Jane was feeling the same way her students must have felt when she first dropped the blue-eyes, brown-eyes experiment on them — that we were about to enter unsure, unsafe territory.

"Well, I suppose," she said, pausing. Then, gathering her wits, cocking her head as she does, "If they didn't run me out on a rail then, then I suppose they won't now."

As I rounded the back of her sky-blue van, I noticed the license plates — BL1 BR1. That made sense for a woman as proud and as stubborn of an experiment that had taken over her life.

As we pulled up into the Riceville Elementary School parking lot and made our way to the principal's office, the secretary looked up. Her eyes widened and I noticed her jaw tightening. She gave the distinct impression that she had just seen a ghost. "This gentleman teaches at the University of Iowa, and we want to see Room No. 10," Jane said in a way-too-direct manner I was growing accustomed to. No "morning, nice weather we're having." Jane came across as urban brusque, an anti-Iowan.

The secretary replied sharply that the south side of the building was closed, something about waxing the hallways. For an instant, I imagined Jane's kids sliding on those same floors. "We just want to peak in," I volunteered. "We'll just be a couple of minutes."

Absolutely not.

"This here is Jane Elliott," I said, not understanding. "She taught in this school for 18 years."

And then it came, the fire in the secretary's eye, this woman who hadn't even been alive when Jane first tried her experiment. "I know who *she* is," the secretary said, glaring, her words spraying us like bullets.

We backed out. I was stunned; Jane was not. “They can’t forget me, and because of who they are, they can’t forgive me,” she said, shaking her head, wincing.

Driving down Woodlawn Avenue, Jane wanted to stop at the public library to show me the hand-painted curtains that once hung in the Riceville Opera House, rescued during the 1901 fire. As we stepped out of Jane’s van, a woman in her mid-forties, parked further down on Woodlawn, glanced our way.

“That you, Mrs. Elliott?”

“Oh no,” Jane said from the corner of her mouth, not knowing what more was in store for us. “You never know who you’re going meet in Riceville.”

Jane shielded her eyes from the yellow morning sun, straining to see the 50 feet in front of us.

“Malinda? Malinda Whisenhunt? That you?”

“It’s me, Mrs. Elliott.”

“Well, I’ll be!”

“Mrs. Elliott, how *are* you?”

The two hugged, and within seconds, Malinda Whisenhunt had tears streaming down her cheeks.

Malinda Whisenhunt, now 43, had been in Jane’s class in 1969, the year after the original experiment.

“Let me look at you,” Jane said, smiling at her student of 35 years ago, the two women now holding hands. “You know, sweetheart, you haven’t changed one bit. You’ve still got that same sweet smile. And you’ll always have it.”

“I’ve never forgotten the exercise,” Malinda said. “It changed by life. Not a day goes by without me thinking about it, Mrs. Elliott. When my grandchildren are old enough, I’d give anything if you’d try the exercise out on them. Would you? Could you?”

That’s when I noticed tears forming in the corners of Jane’s eyes.

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To understand Jane Elliott the person and Jane Elliot the teacher, you must understand where she grew up. The corn grows so fast in Northern Iowa — from seedling to 7-foot-high stalk in 12 weeks — that it crackles nonstop. The sound is like popcorn popping slow motion in a microwave.

That pop-pop-popping sound can be heard especially in the early morning hours, as dew and fog cover the acres of gently swaying stalks that surround Riceville the way water surrounds an island. Row upon row stretch further than most urban minds can fathom, leathery husks and tawny tassels bending in unison to the shimmying breeze. From one angle the corn resembles a hodgepodge of gnarly green stalks, but from another, each plant appears positioned with precision next to another, next to another, an exacting maze, for thousands upon thousands of acres. On some farms, farmers plant test rows to determine the quality of crops derived from different seed suppliers, as though each row were spun out of one of Jane's old classes, plants competing to grow the tallest, to outshine the rest.

Northcentral Iowa is part of a swath of heartland America as rural as it gets. Each homestead is marked off by a stand of trees (usually maples, cottonwoods, or basswoods), as much windbreak as shade grove. Ailing windmills stand unsure next to sturdy foursquare homes, sometimes with fecund beds of black-eyed Susans in front. In nearby Spring Valley, on the Minnesota side of the state line, there's a Friday night gala called the Combine Demolition Derby ("First they were thrashin', now they're CRASHIN'!"). This stretch of bumpy blacktop has no billboards, only occasional hard-drawn signs advertising sweet corn, cattle, boar semen. Driving through Osage, a white-haired man waves as I cruise by the Kum & Go. I have no idea who he is, and it's doubtful he knows who I am. Strangers are rare in these parts. What business, after all, would they have here? What would bring someone with no business or family to such a remote pocket of America where car alarms are as unheard of as burglar alarms. Locals leave their car doors unlocked, keys in the engine. Residents don't put on their turn signals when they drive through town because everyone knows where everyone else is going. As Ray Hansen, a student in Jane's class in 1970, puts it, "You can figure out who's driving down the street by the sound of the car."

In large towns, grain elevators are what you first see from a distance. In mid-sized towns, it's church steeples, their bell towers once a call to farmers toiling in the fields. But in towns Riceville's size (pop: 840), the water tower is the tallest structure, and that's what a visitor notices from a distance — RICEVILLE in red letters on a whitewashed background, with a spinning vane atop.

Once past the runny Wapsipinicon River, you're downtown. The nearest traffic light is 20 miles away. Across from Murph's 2 and the Hangout Bar & Grill, there's the Riceville Pharmacy, a

NAPA Auto Parts, and Touch of Dutch, a restaurant owned by Mennonites. On Addison Street, you'll find Ray's Body Shop and Bait Shop. Ethanol (corn syrup mixed with gasoline) at AG's Motor Mart is \$1.84. As you turn on Woodlawn, there's Judy's Hair Care, a dark storefront that makes me think of Helene Curtis hair spray. In a grassy front yard down the block is a crayoned sign atop six white buckets:

Glads for Sale 3 for \$1.00

One of the best ways to gauge a community is through its newspaper. Newspapers in rural towns are the flour, yeast and water that residents break each week. Amid news of birthdays, photos of kids cannonballing into the municipal pool, and who's made the dean's list, here are assorted items from the *Riceville Recorder*:

An ad for a barbecue & gospel concert, sponsored by the Presbyterian church ("The cost is absolutely FREE...Just like God's love for us!"); news of Tiffany Leland Lewison's "miscellaneous bridal show at 10:00 a.m in the Riceville Library....Please consider this your invitation"; photos of 12 women vying for Miss Mitchell County Fair Queen (It is noted that Miss McIntire's Megan Winkels' hobbies "include doing cross stitch. She stated she has sewn many different things ranging from difficult to easy. Weaving is another thing she has started. She is currently working on a blanket."); a profile of Iowa State Dairy Princess Kayla Hotvedt; an article about high tea the United Methodist Women are planning during which Mary L. Schmidt will present a program entitled "Playing Dress-Up: The Stories and Clothes of our Lives"; a note to "citizens 55 and older who have difficulty seeing or reaching their feet for foot and nail care to visit the upcoming Foot Care Clinic at St. Peter's Lutheran Church"; an ad for an auction at the Hazel Seavy Estate, in which a "Duncan Phyfe-type Table, Hotpoint refrigerator, and Pride Electric Lift Chair (not too old)" will be offered; and a column by Irene Bartels detailing the comings and goings at Riceville Community Rest Home. A three-bedroom home (with detached garage) is listed for \$26,500.

The *Riceville Recorder* carries a particular significance in the historical arc of Jane Elliott since it was this newspaper that propelled her into the national spotlight by first publicizing her anti-discrimination experiment. Yet a discussion with the *Recorder's* editor today shows no pride of kingmaking.

“Mention two words — Jane Elliott— and you get a flood of emotions from people,” says Editor Jim Cross, a man with a closely cropped salt-and-pepper beard, plaid shirt and rimless glasses. “You can see the look on their faces. It brings up immediate anger and hatred.”

Cross has never meet Jane, but like seemingly everyone in Riceville, has an opinion about her. “It’s the same thing over and over again. It’s Riceville 30 years ago. We can’t move on when you have her out there hawking her 30-year-old experiment. It’s the Jane Elliott machine.”

As for me, writing about something everyone would just as soon forget, “You’re stoking the same Jane Elliott agenda. People think that bringing up the same story will keep it alive for Jane. That’s what she wants, after all. I’ve made a point to stay neutral.”

Jim is a newcomer to Riceville, but his wife, Merri, was raised in town, and had Jane Elliott as a teacher in 1981, after Jane switched from third to seventh grade. Merri recalls her first day of school as a 13-year-old. “She introduced herself as *Ms. Elliott*. I mean you just didn’t do that kind of thing in Riceville, particularly then. She said to the whole class, ‘You will call me *Ms. Elliott*, not *Mrs. Elliott*, not *Miss Elliott*. It’s none of your business whether I’m married or not!’” Later that year, she encouraged students to talk to plants in the classroom, and when the television set in Merri’s household broke down, Jane urged Merri’s mother not to buy another.

These days, Merri and the town’s librarian, Randy Krukow, are in charge of updating Riceville’s history for the town’s sesquicentennial in 2005. Riceville’s recorded history stopped with a 25-page booklet compiled by E.K. Hendricks for the city’s centennial back in 1955. In addition to an updated town history, Randy and Merri envision a parade celebrating Riceville 150th birthday. But in neither the town history nor in the parade are there plans to include Jane Elliott.

For a town whose only national headline over the last 50 years has been the “Big Mosquito Shoot-Out,” during which households were furnished with cans of Raid and urged to spray at 7 p.m. on July 29th, 1984, Jane Elliott is Riceville’s most celebrated native. In E.K. Hendricks’ centennial history, Berde Servoss is lauded “for many years [as] a motivating force in the community,” as are Genie Herring and Daisy Walker for their minstrel performances in which they “sang their duets very sweetly” while “dressed in orange-colored gowns [that] contrasted with their ebony complexions.” Riceville’s largest tree, with a 90-foot canopy, is also mentioned in the town’s official history.

Considering the above, outsiders might suggest that Jane Elliott ought not just be invited to the parade, but serve as its grand marshal.

“Maybe the community doesn’t think of her as part of Riceville history. History’s history, that’s the way I think, but I doubt whether there’ll be anything with her,” explains Randy Krukow, as she checks out a library patron’s three books.

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“She could get kids to do anything she wanted them to,” says Walt Gabelmann, Riceville’s mayor from 1964 – 84, rocking in easy chair in his cluttered living room, across from Riceville High. “She got carried away by this possession she developed over human beings. She really had them in a cult, and she was like a cult leader. If you had blue eyes and you were on top that day, well, those kids would do anything she wanted. She actually had them hypnotized.”

Gabelmann, now 82, recalls that when students and their parents complained about Jane they often came to him. “They couldn’t believe what was happening in her classroom. When I saw these kids, I could see how upset they were. Heavens, it made me feel bad! Some of the old people wanted to tar and feather her, that’s had bad it was. I told her she’d have to back off, but she didn’t. She told me she was going to make it a national thing. I told her that she could have all the publicity she wanted, but that she was dealing with human lives. Instead of quitting, she went full-steam ahead. She was playing with matches and once the fire got started, she just poured on the fuel.”

Gabelmann’s comments, however strident, I discovered were modest in comparison to what Riceville’s community of retired teachers had to say. When word spread that I was asking about Jane Elliott, I received a flood of telephone calls, letters and e-mails. One anonymous letter from a retired teacher called Jane “abrasive, immature, and rude,” and noted that the exercise was overly harsh on young children. “It is Jane who has the persecution complex and a difficulty getting along with others. She has profited by perpetuating her view of Riceville, when in fact she has brought the strong feelings about her onto herself by her own narrow-mindedness. Jane is a hypocrite....Riceville and its dear residents have suffered long enough.”

When I tracked down Jane’s former boss, principal Leonard Crawford, who left Riceville 25 years ago and now lives in the southeastern corner of the state, he told me on no uncertain terms, “I’m

not interested in getting involved in this. You understand?" When I persisted, Crawford replied angrily, "What's the matter with you? You don't know the meaning of the word 'no'?"

I called another retired teacher, and after dickering about identifying her by name in print, she agreed to meet. "But," she said, "I wouldn't want to meet you in Riceville. This is a small town and people are liable to find out."

She suggested we meet in Charles City, 20 miles south, but early the next morning, she called to cancel. "We are scared of her," the retired teacher told me. "She can just look at you and scare you to death. I've been under her claws before and I don't want to get under them again."

One retired teacher, who has known Jane for years, is Mary Lou Koschemeder, 76. "She always seemed to have the children stirred up," she says. "She got away with things that none of the other teachers could ever do. She made a movie on the street. She brought her daughter in and they did dancing lessons. She let the kids do puzzles...things like that. It wasn't her subject line to be doing that. Why she got to do all these things I could never understand."

Mrs. Koschmeder, like the other teachers, takes what Jane did personally. "One of my sons is shy, and I said, thank the lord, that he wasn't in her class. If Jane would have had him, it would have ruined him for life. He would have been devastated. She seemed to enjoy humiliating the kids. I know some of the children were hurt really deeply, and still are today."

Another retired teacher, Dorothy Wallace, 83, had this to say: "She was very rude to the other teachers. People felt she was domineering. If you could see the expression in her eyes when she pointed her finger at you, it was like she'd like to mop up the floor with you."

And another former teacher, Ruth Setka, 78: "I was probably the only teacher who'd talk to her. Jane always was angry. Always. Maybe she developed that as a kind of defense. I'll tell you one thing: I think third grade was too young for what she did. Junior high maybe. Little children don't like uproar in the classroom. And what she did caused an uproar. Everyone's tired of her. I wouldn't say I hate Jane, but I'm tired of hearing about her and her experiment and how everyone here is a racist. That's not true. Let's just move on."

"Harnacks," a woman answered the phone, a throwback to party lines and operators, where each town had its own telephone company and exchange (Riceville's still is 985). Steve Harnack 61, who arrived in town in the fall of 1977 as principal of K-8, got to the heart of the matter quickly. "I

hate to use this term, but it was brain washing. When kids are so young and the teacher says something, it's gospel. The younger the kids are, the more they buy into it. If a teacher came into this community today and tried this experiment, they'd run her out of town. Jane's pretty arrogant, and with all the fame, she just got worse. She was the kind of teacher who'd walk straight up to another teacher and tell her that what she was doing was all wrong. *But* as an educator, I must say, Jane was terrific. I never had a problem with her in that area. What she did for kids in teaching academics, she was excellent."

Harnack said he believes that the exercise might have been more palatable to Riceville residents if Jane had involved parents. "We're rural Iowa, lily white. I don't think this community was ready for what she did. Maybe the way to sell the exercise would have been to invite the parents in, to talk about what she'd be doing. You must get the parents first. If you don't sell the parents, you're not going to get their support on bond issues and a whole bunch of other things."

Jane posed an administrative problem for Harnack. Parents frequently came to him and requested that their children not be assigned to her classroom. Jane maintains it was because "they didn't want their students taught by that nigger-over"; Harnack says he doesn't recall hearing that as a reason. "We'd have 14 or so in her class, and 22 – 24 in other classes. That's not an effective way to run a school."

Such concerns, though, ought to be trifling when it came to what Jane could offer, said Dean Weaver, 69, superintendent of Riceville schools from 1972 – 1979. A thoughtful man with a hearty laugh, Weaver said, "I thought she was one of the outstanding teachers of our profession. She challenged her kids. She had her kids thinking beyond the boundaries."

Weaver recalls one day when Jane waved him over to her classroom and her third-graders proceeded to interview him press-conference style about what a school administrator does. The Riceville school budget had gone over a million dollars that year, which spurred Jane to ask students if they had a concept of what a million of anything was. When she didn't get an answer, Jane and her kids over the coming weeks set out to count a million soy beans, but that year, soy prices were through the roof, so after the children got to 10,000, Jane switched to corn kernels, then to rice grains until they reached a million.

Another time, Weaver remembered, Jane got to talking about state trees, so she had her kids write and ask for seedlings from each state, which they planted at the far end of the school yard (the trees are standing today). Another time she had students broadcasting from a ham radio station based in her classroom, antenna wires strewn on the school's roof.

“She'd just go ahead and *do* things,” Weaver said. “She was a local girl and the other teachers were intimidated by her success. Jane would get invited to go to Timbuktu to give a speech and I arranged to give her time to go. That got the other teachers angry.”

One of her former students, Jay McGovern, today a special-education teacher in Lee's Summit, a suburb of Kansas City, says he found Jane's teaching style refreshing, as when she asked students to place bets that aliens would be found in outer space by the year 2000. Jay, 38, is thoughtful and energetic, perhaps reflective of a new generation of public-school educators. “She was an innovator,” he says. “She got students to think. She got kids to read. She had couches in her classes, and to sit in there you had to be a reader.”

But when it comes to the centerpiece of what Jane did, the blue-eyes, brown-eyes exercise, Jay is less certain. “The way she did it, she put people down. Today, educators don't challenge kids' perceptions of their lives. You try to build upon kids' experiences and then find ways to reflect on those experiences. You don't ridicule or berate people to try to make your point. Back in the '60's, there wasn't that body of research.

“I find it ironic that she sent kids home crying. If my daughter came home crying and said her teacher ridiculed her, I'd be angry. That's not what school's for, no matter how important the teacher thinks the exercise is.”

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For years academic researchers have tried to quantify the effectiveness of Jane's experiment, seeking to determine whether the exercise could reduce a participant's prejudice on a long-term basis, as well as whether the exercise posed significant risks to the students. Such results are difficult to quantify, and researchers have come up with inconclusive results. Some believe there is a place for such an exercise; others maintain that the potential toll is far too great to justify its continuation. Two professors of education in England, Ivor F. Goodson and Pat Sikes, proclaim unequivocally what Jane did was unethical, calling such experimentation psychologically and emotionally damaging.

A flashpoint in public education has always been what exactly ought to be in the province of the teacher and what constitutes material students need to learn. Few would argue that math and reading skills aren't essential, but when it comes to abstract proficiencies such as how citizens ought to comport themselves in a democratic society, there is little consensus. Any discussion on the issue quickly veers to the political. Morality and equality were what Jane was striving to teach with her stark experiment, and some say she had no business doing that in a public-school classroom, particularly with children so young. Even though 36 years have passed since Jane first divided her classroom, the experiment is still on the national political agenda and rankles many.

Linda Seebach, a conservative columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*, just last June termed Jane's exercise "sadistic," writing, "You would think that any normal person would realize that she had done an evil thing. But not Elliott. She repeated the abuse with subsequent classes, and finally turned it into a fully commercial enterprise, hawking workshops, lectures, books and videos. You can find her on the Web, but I won't give you the address because she is a disgrace."

It's important to place the experiment in a historic context. Jane pioneered her exercise during a window of 62 days between the assassinations of King and Robert F. Kennedy, events that were followed by riots in dozens of U.S. cities. That she has continued the experiment with adults has caused critics to say Jane doesn't recognize that America's political and social landscape has changed. Alan Charles Kors, a professor of history at University of Pennsylvania, for instance, calls Jane Elliott's diversity training "Orwellian" and singles her out as "the Torquemada of thought reform." Kors writes that Jane's exercise teaches "blood-guilt and self-contempt to whites," adding that "in her view, nothing has changed in American since the collapse of Reconstruction."

Others, with a more liberal viewpoint, say that Jane's exercise ought to be made compulsory. In their view, teachers ought to be developers of virtue, not just instructors of facts and problem solving. In *Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues That Teach Kids to Do the Right Things*, educational psychologist Michele Borda suggests the exercise "teaches our children to counter stereotypes before they become full-fledged, lasting prejudices and to recognize that every human being has the right to be treated with respect." Amitai Etzioni, a professor of sociology at The

George Washington University, lauds the exercise, saying its implementation enables public schools to serve a primary function in our society: as a developer of character and empathy.

The heart of Jane and her experiment, of course, rests with her former students, and one by one, I contacted scores of them to get at their assessment of Jane Elliott and the experiment that each of them went through. They are living testaments to what Jane did as a teacher. They form Jane Elliott's legacy since they are the only key holders to determining where the experiment was a success or failure.

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When I met Dale McCarthy, a third-generation farmer, we sat on either side of a table at the Hardee's in nearby Osage, the smell of a late summer rainstorm still in the air, claps of thunder in the distance. Dale was in Jane's class in 1969, the second time she tried the experiment. He has a goatee, a self-effacing smile, and chocolate-brown eyes that pull a listener close. By the grimace on his face, it seemed that Dale might still be reeling from Jane's experiment 35 years ago.

"Right off, Mrs. Elliott says blue-eyed people can go to the front of the lunch line, that they'll get extra recess time. But before that we'd had to rearrange our seats, so that the blue-eyed kids could sit in the front. We thought it was going to be like this for the rest of the year. At that age, if someone tells you something, especially the teacher, you believe it. We were bad, and the blue-eyed kids, they were good.

"During recess, one blue-eyed kid and a brown-eyed kid got into a fight, and Mrs. Elliott, made it sound like it was the brown-eyed kid's fault, that brown-eyed kids always get into fights. If you answered a question wrong, and you had brown eyes, she made you feel terrible. 'Well, what do you expect?' she'd say. 'Look at the color of his eyes!'"

The payoff of the experiment came for Dale when he was 19, the first time he met a black person. Dale recalls sticking out his hand, his flesh touching the other man's, and at precisely that moment, Dale says he flashed back to Mrs. Elliott. "Oh, I'd still have shook his hand, but I might not have wanted to. Without Jane Elliott, I might have been standoffish. It always has stuck in my mind not to be prejudice and that's because of Jane." Dale volunteers that one of his brothers-in-law is black and the other is Jewish, and "we get along great."

Dale concedes, though, the exercise was nearly impossible to endure. Would he want his own 15-year-old daughter to go through it?

“If she humiliated my daughter as bad as she humiliated me, my wife would be on the phone to the principal and I’d be right behind her. You had a worthless feeling that day — but that’s also what made such a lasting impression.”

All teachers have their own styles. For some students, that style enhances the learning process; for others, that style slams it shut. Dale recalls that when he told Jane that he wanted to go into farming, Jane said that would be a pity, something he remembers to this day. For Sue Oulman Rawhouser, 44, who still lives and works in Riceville and was in the same class as Dale, Jane came across as overly strict and harsh. Someone Rawhouser assumed would be nurturing turned out to be cold and intimidating “I saw her handle children who were in need of comfort and she gave them none. It was horrid. If you didn’t get the right answer, if you didn’t pick up your pencil when she told you to, she made a spectacle of you. I had never experienced anything like that. I’ll never forget it. Till the day I die, I’ll remember what we went through.”

Another student, Gretchen Eastman, 37, who today is a middle-school teacher in Eastern Iowa, says she remains uneasy about the experiment, but thinks the risk was worth taking. “I don’t know if third graders have the emotional maturity to understand the deeper meaning of the exercise. Kids in that grade are very trusting, and you have to be careful not to abuse that trust. The experiment was rough. You feel the pain of someone who is picked on and put down. And if you defend your friends, you get picked on, too — which helps bring home the lesson that a person who speaks out better be prepared for a certain amount of backlash.”

Like every former student I spoke with, Gretchen remembers the exercise as though it happened yesterday. “What I learned from it — and I do go back to it in my head often — is that it was moment in my life, something that has stayed with me. She challenged my thinking. I think the exercise was ethically and morally necessary, and by far, Jane was one of my favorite teachers.”

Another student, Mick Lauren-Ring, 37, now a software engineer in Portland, remembers the exercise vividly, but recalls other elements of Jane. “She had that look, and when you got it, you knew you’d have to straighten up. He remembers that during lunch if students were

slouching, Jane would take the knuckle of her index finger and she'd run it down the student's back. (When asked about this, Jane said it wasn't her knuckle, but her thumb. When I persisted, she said she was wrong to employ such tactics.)

After the experiment, Julie Kleckner Baird, who was in the first class back in 1968, made it a personal point to strive never to be racist. "I was determined that I'd be nice to the first black person I'd see. So, one day my parents took me to Rochester and walking towards me was a black woman, and as we got closer I blurted out, "Hi!" I can't imagine what she must have thought. But it was very deliberate on my part."

Julie, 45, has green eyes and as a result was rolled into the blue-eyed group. "I remember having to apologize to the brown-eyed people for something, and Mrs. Elliott made me kneel down in front of the whole class."

Such harsh tactics were what made the exercise so real, and with that memory has come life changes for many of Jane's students.

Julie spent three weeks in Tanzania as part of an exchange program with her Lutheran Church in Tanzania, but way before that, during high school, her family hosted a Korean exchange student — actions she attributes in part to Jane. Brown-eyed Debra Anderson Roth, 44, in the first class Jane did the experiment, says without a doubt, "Mrs. Elliott gave me a sense of compassion and fairness. When I see someone being treated differently than someone else, I remember what it felt like the day the brown-eyed people were treated. We were created equal and somewhere along the way people have forgotten that." The wife of a Baptist youth minister in a low-income African-American community in Beloit, Wisconsin, for years Debra has volunteered in homeless centers, sent clothing to war-torn countries, and helped raise money for underprivileged children. She says she lives across the street from a crack den and shootings in her neighborhood aren't uncommon. "As part of Mrs. Elliott's experiment, I learned to treat others the way I wanted to be treated and by helping children hopefully they will grow to help others — that's the way to change society."

Debbie Hughes Sutton, 45, also in Jane's first class, says, "At first I had a terribly sad feeling about someone being denied something just because of his eye color. It's something that has never left me, and I know that I'm not prejudiced today because of it."

Penny Rickerl, 40, who was in Jane's third grade class in 1972 and still lives in the Riceville area on a third-generation farm, today says she too was profoundly affected. "I'm glad someone like Jane Elliott opened my eyes. You just didn't see different races here. The experiment stuck with me. People are quick to judge, and I try not to be like that any longer. You can't judge another person unless you've walked in his shoes — just what Mrs. Elliott told us. And I think it only could be done with young kids. Older kids have an attitude. But 8-year-olds love their teachers. They soak up whatever their teachers tell them."

For Rick Sletten, 45, who was in the first class, today a farmer near Riceville, the experiment has also stayed with him. "I remember I had a friend and we were standing in lunch line talking, and this day I didn't have privileges (my group was on the bottom that day), and Jane got right in my face and shoved me against the wall, saying I didn't have any rights to speak that day. If you had rights, you could break a window and that would be all right. But if you put your fingerprints on a window and it was your day without rights, boy, would she ever blast you!"

Another student, Kristine Isaacson Zunkel, 44, says the exercise "has had a life-long effect on me. The experiment showed how it felt to be an outcast simply because I have brown eyes. To this day, I treat everyone with the respect they deserve regardless of race, religion, physical appearance or sexual preference. In essence, I treat everyone the way I want to be treated. And it was Mrs. Elliott who first fostered that sense in my mind."

And this from another student in the first year of the experiment, Jeanette Goodale Mayer, 45, who today works in a nursing home in nearby Adams, Minnesota: "I admire what Mrs. Elliott has done. She is No. 1 in my blue eyes. She made us all feel special in some way. Thank you, Mrs. Elliott, you deserve a reward for all you've given to the world."

For Dallas resident Alan Moss, 44, also in Jane's first-year experiment, "I remember those two days like they were yesterday. I never knew what prejudice was, and today many of my best friends are blacks. I think that's because of Jane Elliott." He says, though, to get her point across, Jane at times turned heavy-handed. "She humiliated me in school. She wrote on my papers, "Messy Moss," and soon the kids would pick up on that and my nickname became Messy Moss. That didn't feel so good." Alan volunteers that his handwriting is still messy.

Susan Ginder Kellaway, 43, who lives near Fort Bragg, North Carolina, discounts Jane's detractors. A student in Jane's class in 1969, Kellaway says, "People can talk all they want about Mrs. Elliott, but we lived through those two days, and we know how effective the exercise was. If she would have sugarcoated the exercise, it wouldn't have worked. The way she did it was the only way that it could have stayed with us for long."

One of the most stirring recollections comes from fellow classmate Sandi Dohman Burke, 43. Sandi had speech problems, and says that Jane was the first teacher who truly cared about her. "I had a teacher before Jane who slapped me and who told me that I'd never amount to anything. Jane made us feel better about ourselves. She gave us confidence. She made us think that we'd amount to something. She pushed us and she kept pushing us. She wanted to prove she could do great things with us. I tried harder because of Jane. The experiment showed us what we were capable of doing."

Like Sandi Dohman Burke, Ray Hansen was also pegged a slow learner. Now 43 and an attorney in Rochester, Minnesota, Ray says that because of Jane, "I go out of my way to offer a kind word to people of color. I don't think I would do that if not for Jane. What Jane taught is woven into the fabric of my being. You cannot underestimate the impact that such an experience has had on us. I don't know how anyone who went through the experience can say that they have not been changed. Jane must get the credit she deserves for making the world a better place, and making us better human beings. The level of impact of the experiment is on the same magnitude as your first love, the first death of someone close to you, the birth of a child."

When I met Ray in the law library of his firm, he recalled the day of the experiment (when Jane switched the rules and made blue-eyed students the superior ones) and the awful sense of self it revealed to him. "I remember that I was evil. I delighted in the torment of my friends. It made me feel good and strong. I knew I could get away with whatever I wanted. I'd make suggestions like, 'Hey Mrs. Elliott, maybe you should go to the cafeteria lady and tell her that brown-eyed kids shouldn't be allowed to get seconds,' and Jane would look at me and say, 'Raymond, what a good idea!' At that age, you don't have a moral compass that tells you anything else."

“And then, back in the class, the blue-eyed kids outperformed the other kids. The blue-eyed kids had all the answers. And the brown-eyed kids just sat there, staring at the floor. All of a sudden, someone in charge says you’re smart and says the other people aren’t. And you know what? It made me soar.”

Ray would like his own two children to experience the exercise. “If you consider the job of the teacher to teach only the three R’s, then this was not the right thing to do. But if you think of teaching more holistically — to teach a personal value system to youngsters — then it succeeded like nothing else I can imagine. I consider it a privilege to have learned from her.”

About Jane’s style, Ray says, she has a “strong sense of self. She had to survive what she did. She has a charisma unlike anyone else I have ever met.”

For Rex Kozak, also in Ray’s class, the exercise ultimately led him to his profession — high school history teacher and now principal of East Marshall High School in Le Grand, Iowa. The son of a farmer and the youngest of 10 children, for Rex Jane’s experiment wasn’t as much about racism as it was about the limitations that children allow to be placed on them. “Jane taught that if you don’t have expectations or goals for yourself then you’ll only be willing to go as far as what other people expect of you. She showed me anything was possible, that if you want it, you can achieve it. For me the exercise wasn’t about black and white, it was about a whole lot more. It showed how you should live.”

Even though he admires Jane, Rex would never try her experiment in his school today, saying to do so would be “suicide.” He says parents would have to be clued into the experiment, and in addition, the system of education today is centered on children’s’ feelings, which would make the exercise impossible to implement. “The exercise give students a sense of self-worth, but it does that by one day taking away other students’ confidence. No way could you do that today.”

Jane’s crusading spirit certainly made ripples, he says. “Back then Jane’s job was to teach and keep her mouth shut. That’s what teachers were supposed to do. Here was this woman in the middle of nowhere, and she took a stance in the community, and she made enemies because of it.” Jane’s toughness, Rex says, though, is all bravado. “She has a heart of gold. She developed callused skin to protect herself.”

Dianne Juhl, 47, a former program manager for Microsoft who now lives on Bainbridge Island in Washington, had Jane as a third-grade teacher in 1966 before the first experiment, but says that the exercise “reverberated throughout the school and Riceville, and set me on a path that I’m on today.” Dianne says Jane touched on issues like oppression, class, race, discrimination, and human suffering — jaw-droppers anywhere, but particularly in Riceville 35 years ago. “Jane was part of the collective consciousness of the entire community. She was a catalyst and her experiment was a turning point for everyone in Riceville. Whether people in that community liked what she did or not, we all were affected by it, and no one will ever forget it.”

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It is easy to understand why so many Riceville residents still rail against Jane. Their resentment bespeaks Jane’s personality, her vertical trajectory to get where she is today, and the nature of any community, large or small. Jane certainly has a mouth on her, and over the years she has not hesitated to zing the locals as provincial, narrow-minded, dead-set in their ways. Many wanted to clip her wings, even though by the mid-1980’s she was flying high. Rumors about Jane run rampant in Riceville. There seems to be a need to take her down more than just a couple of pegs. One teacher wrote me that Jane had once slapped another teacher in the school, although no record of such abuse has even been recorded, nor apparently was witnessed by anyone else. When news that Jane and her husband, Darald, had bought a winter home in Sun City, California in 1999, word circulated in Riceville that the home was a mansion. More than one local mentioned to me that Jane's California house cost \$2 million, paid for with all the money Jane had earned importing her exercise for diversity training at corporations. In fact, the modest home is located in a retirement community in Riverside County and is assessed at less than \$120,000.

No doubt, Jane’s driving personality to accomplish innovation rubbed many in Riceville the wrong way. Anyone who would have devised such an experiment and implemented it on 8-year-olds would have to be strong-headed, confident, ambitious, independent and opinionated. To do what Jane did required her to take not just a chance, but a leap into the unknown, and to do it in such a small rural town, where contrary opinion can be thought impertinent, required a calculated recklessness. Jane says she doesn’t have much interest in religion, but in many ways, she embodies a line from the

New Testament, the one that goes, “No prophet is accepted in his own native land.” Or as Rex Kozak put it a little less delicately: “If people like her, they call her a sage, but if they don’t, she’s a bitch.”

Both Jane and her family freely admit that she is arrogant and stubborn. Accustomed to being slurred as a “bitch,” Jane says it comes with the territory, and anyway, she says, she likes to look at the word as an acronym — “Being In Total Control, Honey.”

When she gets hold of an idea, she seldom lets go. It was Jane, for instance, who complained to the Crayola Company about its single flesh-color crayon, and today there are ten flesh-color crayons — from ebony to sand. It was Jane who complained to pantyhose companies about nude-colored pantyhose, and today there are dozens of nude shades hosiery companies manufacture. Another of Jane’s windmills: To force Clairol to discontinue the slogans, “Do blondes have more fun?” and “If I’ve only one life, let me live it as a blonde!”

When I mentioned that there are no plans to include her in Riceville’s sesquicentennial celebration, Jane smiled, shook her head, and then chuckled. “There aren’t enough eggs that could be laid in this country for people to throw at me.”

Jane’s daughter Sarah, 48, pipes in: “She’d have to stand in a cage on the back of a float. Even then there’d be serious damage.”

Jane and I are sitting at her dining room table, the smell of corn and soy crops mixed with loam and topsoil is wafting though the open door, creating a hearty confluence of earthy aromas. After all these years, Jane still seems as though she’s bruising for a fright. Her steely blue eyes can stare down the fiercest opponent, and she doesn’t hesitate to use them to her advantage.

She defends her exercise the same way a mother defends her child. “You have to put the exercise in the context of the rest of the year. Yes, that day was tough. Yes, the children felt angry, hurt, betrayed. But they returned to a better place — unlike a child of color, who gets abused every day, and never has the ability to find him or herself in a nurturing classroom environment.” She flicks off criticism — that the exercise creates distrust when an authority figure lies, then recants those lies maintaining they were justified because of a greater good — by saying that she spent the first three months of the school year creating trust, then springing the exercise, and then using the next three months building back that trust.

“When people say that this exercise harms children, I say, ‘Hold on, wait just a minute!’ Yes, it’s risky, but it’s an inoculation against racism. We give our children shots to inoculate them against polio and small pox, to protect them against the realities in the future. There are risks to those inoculations, too, but we determine that those risks are worth taking.”

The anchor to the exercise that girds its strength and utility, Jane says, is allowing a youngster to see his or her potential.

“Look (those steely eyes again), if you have something that will enable an 8-year-old to find out what he or she is capable of, and you don’t use it, I think that is educational malfeasance. I saw kids who were brilliant the day before, and after the exercise, they couldn’t read a single word. And when they were on top of the exercise, they bloomed. They positively blossomed. This wasn’t some abstract academic exercise. I saw this with my own eyes, year after year after year.”

She admits that she was rough on students, bolstering some, ridiculing others. “I tried to walk gently. I knew which kids I had to tiptoe around. The fact is, though, that that’s part of the reason why the exercise works. Those students who got picked on because of their eye color, they’ll never allow their own children to feel what they felt that day. I’m glad the exercise caused pain. It was supposed to. I’m glad they remember that day so many years ago. I’m glad they hated it. If it changes the way they treat other people, then it worked. If it was the worst thing that ever happened to those children, then I think how fortunate they must be.”

She downplays any psychological damage the experiment is alleged to have caused students, pointing out that if the exercise caused damage, then in our litigious society someone surely by now would have hired an attorney to knock on her door. “If it was so destructive, then where are the lawsuits, where’s the evidence of all the harm that I supposedly caused? How many students had to go through counseling because of what I did to them? How many were psychologically ruined, who dropped out of school, who were so traumatized?”

She says she never was pressured into asking parents for permission to initiate the experiment, and never would have if she had been so instructed by a principal or superintendent. “That would have ruined the exercise! It was the parents who were the cause of the racism that these kids displayed. If I would have involved them, then I’d never have gotten a chance to do the

exercise.” Jane dips her chin, her eyes large again. “Besides,” she pauses, “do parents of black children get parental notices every day of *their* lives?”

Jane says she resolutely believes that the role of a teacher is to enhance in students a sense of moral development. “That’s what I tried to teach, and that’s what drove the other teachers crazy. School ought to be about developing character, but most teachers won’t touch that with a 10-foot pole.”

Today, Jane and Darald split their time between their California and Iowa homes. Despite all the furor she created in Riceville, if you ask her which place she enjoys more, Jane doesn't hesitate. "I love Iowa," she says, eyes wide as though to think differently would be sacrilege.

Now in her seventh decade, Jane has become increasingly aware of her mortality. Jane’s father and sister are buried in a family plot in Riceville, where her 96-year-old mother plans to be laid to rest. Jane waves her hands as though shooing away a horsefly when the subject comes up. She wants her ashes scattered over a nearby creek, where the late-summer fog often settles and sparrows like to flutter.

It’ll be easier for everyone, Jane says. The people of Riceville don’t want me, she says, but this region will always be home. As Jane likes to point out, seasons are the only constant in Iowa. “There’s a sense of renewal here that I’ve never seen as great anywhere else. You have another chance. Just when you think that the fertile soil can sprout no more, another season comes ’round, and you see another year of bountiful crops, tall and straight. It makes you proud.”

3A+The+Experiment+that+Shocked+the+Nation+and+Turned+a+Town+Against+its+Most+Famous+Daughter.&as_publication=Smithsonian+Magazine+%28online%29&as_ylo=2005&as_yhi=2005&btnG=Search Scholar search]]. Classroom exercise. While there are variations of the story, the exercise Elliott developed for her third grade class in Riceville, Iowa was a result of Martin Luther King's assassination. While the blue-eyed children did taunt the brown-eyed in ways similar to what had occurred the previous Friday, Elliott reports it was much less intense. At 2:30 on that Monday, Elliott told the brown-eyed children to take off their armbands and the children cried and hugged each other. Ms. Jane Elliott's "brown eyes, blue eyes" experiment in 1970: A 3rd grade teacher conducted a racism experiment with her class. Watch what happens next. Further Reading: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Elliott. Blue eyes, brown eyes: What Jane Elliott's famous experiment says about race 50 years on. Karina Bland, The Republic | azcentral.com Published 6:00 a.m. MT Nov. 17, 2017 | Updated 9:18 a.m. MT May 30, 2018. Elliott left teaching in 1985 and since then, she has traveled the world speaking and sometimes conducting the eye-color exercise in workshops at schools, universities, businesses and government agencies. She's taken lessons from that first exercise in April 1968, a time that can still bring her to tears when she talks about it and tried to change people's minds about prejudice. Because there was something a lot of people don't remember about that first exercise.