

# *“The Best of Enemies”*

By Helen Lutz

Growing up in the Midwest I experienced the racial divide in our country. There were places for black people and places for white people and rarely did the races mix. My grandmother wouldn't let me sit on the back bench of the city bus (she didn't drive) when we went downtown because that is where the black people sat; we had to sit up front. During my high school and college years I lived through the Civil Rights movement and integration – it was a rough time in our history; the operative word in that sentence is ‘history.’



Recently I read a post on Facebook from a friend (who is black) which I found eye-opening after all these years. The author of the post is black and her 14 year old son was accidentally locked out of the house during a snowstorm. Unfortunately, none of their neighbors were available to help and she left work to go home. One of her co-workers mentioned that he might be able to get in through a window – no, he's a 14 year old African-American boy. She continued that when they go shopping after school ... he must leave his backpack in the car. When he wants to take a walk with friends after dark ... the answer is ‘no.’ After all the years of racial integration and Civil Rights laws and talk, life is still difficult for a 14 year old African-American boy in this country.

“The Best of Enemies” tackles the race issue, specifically school desegregation in Durham, North Carolina in 1971. The courts have ordered integration, but there are still some holdouts, one of which is Durham. While the blacks argue with the City Council that the facilities and quality of the black high school is inferior to that of the white high school, it's not until an electrical fire causes irreparable damage to the black school that the topic of integration comes to a head – the black school is no longer safe and the children need to attend school somewhere.

Ann Atwater, played by Taraji P. Henson, is a local black activist, community organizer and mother who vehemently vocalizes the problems with the Council's solutions to the issue of the black school. It seems that some of the school is safe and the black children can just attend classes on split schedules; no harm, no foul. Not sitting well with the black community a lawsuit is filed to force integration; however, a wily southern judge side-steps the issue by calling for a charrette which requires the citizens of Durham to have mediated meetings over a two week period to resolve the issue apart from the courts. A big city community organizer, Bill Riddick (Babou Ceesay), is hired to direct the charrette.

In North Carolina during the 60's and 70's the Ku Klux Klan is alive and well living in Durham, shooting up the homes of folks they deem undesirable, and causing as much trouble as possible in their quest for white supremacy. Local Exalted Cyclops of the Durham KKK, C. P. Ellis (Sam Rockwell) is their revered leader, white is right. After much coaxing Atwater and Ellis accept the roles of co-chairs of the charrette; after all, it's good to have an insider on the panel to gauge the proceedings as far as the mayor and council are concerned.

“The Best of Enemies” is loosely based on a true story by Osha Gray Davidson, however, writer/director Robin Bissell takes a Hollywood approach to the story pitting the far left and the far right against one another working towards a kumbaya outcome. Following the story of Atwater and Ellis as they are forced to work together to resolve major issues is both entertaining and enlightening. They learn that both possess misconceptions as well as love in their hearts of hearts. One a scale of one to four Hart Beats I give “The Best of Enemies” ♡♡ 1/2 HARTS. It's an enlightening story, but a bit sugar-coated.