

Answer Key: Discussion Questions

Physicist Activist:

Dr. Elmer Imes and the Civil Rights Case of Juliette Derricotte

1. What was life like for African Americans in the South in the 1930s?

Life for African Americans in the South during the 1930s was particularly difficult. They almost universally experienced discrimination, and the combination of passive and systematic segregation often resulted in the black communities' infrastructure and resources becoming inferior to those of their white counterparts.

2. What is segregation? What is the difference between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation? In addition to hospitals, what other American institutions or aspects of life were segregated?

“Segregation was a system derived from the efforts of white Americans to keep African Americans in a subordinate status by denying them equal access to public facilities and ensuring that blacks lived apart from whites.” *De jure* segregation is enforced by law, and often occurred in the South. *De facto* segregation was a product of social and cultural norms (like African Americans living in the same neighborhoods due to low incomes and racial/cultural affinity) and was more common in the North. Other than hospitals, segregated areas included public transportation, theaters, graveyards and many others.¹

3. What happened to Juliette Derricotte and the students from Fisk University? How did racial segregation affect the outcome of events?

Derricotte and several Fisk students were in an automobile accident in Dalton, Georgia, where they sustained serious injuries. Initially, they were transported to the offices of local white physicians, but since it was commonly understood there that African Americans were never to be taken to the white hospital, they were instead taken to the home of Mrs. Wilson. She was a local black woman who treated sick and injured members of the black community, but her facilities and equipment were extremely sub-standard, especially compared to those available to whites. The consensus was that had those who were injured been taken to the hospital, their chances of survival—and at minimum, the abatement of their suffering—would have increased dramatically. The injured suffered here for hours before being transported to Chattanooga, where two tragically perished.

4. Why did the NAACP launch an investigation of the events in Dalton, Georgia?

¹ Lawson, Steven F. “Segregation.” Freedom’s Story, Teacherserve®. National Humanities Center. 3 June 2016. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/segregation.htm>

The NAACP launched an investigation into the events in Dalton after it was discovered that not one of the injured individuals from Fisk were taken to the local Hamilton Memorial Hospital after their car accident. Upon hearing of these events from Ethel Gilbert and Elmer Ives—both employees at Fisk University in Nashville—the University President requested an investigation. The NAACP became involved shortly thereafter.

5. Reflect on the excerpt from Ethel Gilbert’s letter. How does she compare the treatment she would have received as a white woman to that received by Juliette Derricotte and her friends?

Gilbert claimed that what happened to Derricotte would never have occurred to her, as a white woman. She stated that “within one-half hour after the incident, I would have been in a modern hospital.” She laments that all the kindness Mrs. Wilson offered was no substitute for the clean and comfortable space, proper equipment, and efficient doctors and nurses available at a hospital.

6. Is it surprising that a physicist could also be an activist? Why or why not?

It should not be surprising that a physicist could also be an activist. Working at Fisk University, Ives was an important member of his community, and his involvement with the investigation lent extra weight and credence to its proceedings.