

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB #27
A Shop Steward Speaks

846 Broadway - Lot #49
Saugus, Mass. 01905
Oct. 21, 1974

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

A For Sale sign sits on the tiny brownish-green front lawn at 12 New Hampshire Avenue. Irene Lambert, the owner of the two family house and occupant of the upstairs duplex, is sitting in her attractive living room talking about being a light sleeper.

"I am usually up at 12:30 or 1:00 walking around to see if the kids are all right. I like to peek in their rooms and see them sleeping. My oldest at home is nineteen. I know I don't need to look in, but it makes me feel good, and I've done it since they were little. Anyway, I'm a light sleeper. I never reach sound sleep. People wake up rested. I stay tired, although I don't require much sleep. I'm one of those people who can take a nap for an hour and I'm feeling good. I usually come home after work, have supper, and fall asleep for a half hour or so right over there in that stupid chair and get a crick in my neck. If I was to lie down I wouldn't fall asleep.

"Right now my biggest concern is selling the house. What I'm trying to do is to get into this low income housing. I'm sweating it out, because we are just getting by. I earn just enough to support my family. My money's tied up. All this (she points around the house) you see, my children and I did. We are \$4,000 in debt, so it comes out of my pay. After everything has been taken from my check we have about \$25 a week to live on and we're making it. When the divorce comes through, and the house is sold, we'll pay my bills, and there won't be so much pressure on me.

"I resent my husband for making it so tough on us. He had more than that. Why should they have less? They shouldn't have to worry about money and I shouldn't need to work ten hours. John and I were married for nearly twenty-three years, and it isn't right. He's taken away their chance to have their full youth, and I hold that against him."

Nathan passes through the living room and Irene introduces us. He quickly moves on. Irene looks after him and says, "He's a fine young man. All my children are good, I'll tell you they're my real strength. This one he'll be nineteen in November. He's a musician; he's a drummer. He

*Richard Balzer is an Institute Fellow exploring the effects of social and economic change on lower-middle-class America.

wants to go to Berkley (music school) and I intend to see that he gets there.

"Robin's the oldest (21), and she's my only daughter. Now she may say I'm out to lunch, but I think she's mixed up, and hurting because of the trouble John and I had. When Robin got out of high school, she got a full scholarship to Salem State. She didn't take it. It almost blew my mind. She wouldn't go. She wanted to party, and that's just what she does, she parties. She's a beautiful girl, and I know she does everything there is to do. One day she came to me and she said she was pregnant I almost---typical mother---I almost went into orbit. When I came down from it, I said, 'Well, if you are, you're coming home.' She came home, but she wasn't pregnant. She has her own apartment now.

"The middle boy, John, this is the one that's closest to me. Parents say they don't have favorites, but I think you do. There's a closeness there that's special. I try very hard not to show my feelings but undoubtedly I must. The youngest one, Yancy, he's the baby (14) and he's paid for not having a father.

"I feel very badly about that because I feel boys need men around them. I've been lucky with the friends that I have around here, because the males have taken over. But it's not the same thing as a father, and I resent John for that. We have four beautiful kids and he's not treating them right. I didn't want our splitup to be like everyone else's. I didn't want to be saying, 'He's a no good bum', and everything like that. I didn't want that but that's how it's turning out.

"When he left me I still loved him. Hell, I only just stopped loving him a year ago. And now there isn't anything he can do, but just keep out of my way. The less I see of him the better I like it. Really if I were a man I'd knock him out because he needs a beating.

"He isn't a mean man, you'd like him, but he's treated me and the children wrong. He's doing his own thing, going through those changes men are supposed to go through. Right now he's down in Cambridge being Joe College. This man is 43 and he's at school taking up dancing. He paints, he goes to plays, he's become a camera bug, and all that shit. So be it, but he shouldn't ignore his children. I know it's a terrible thing to say, but I hope he hurts. I hope he gets his and he will. You just don't sow without reaping and he's sown some pretty damn rotten seeds.

"It wasn't always that way between us. We were married for nearly twenty-three years. My husband was actually only the second guy I ever went out with, and now looking back I realize that wasn't good. I came from a very sheltered background.

"There were only three black families in town (Andover). My family was very well respected. We certainly weren't wealthy, but I had everything everyone else had. If my mother couldn't buy it, she made it. My mother, who is 78 and the oldest member of her church, was born in Methuen.

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Her maiden name was Murphy. I guess when her people fled slavery from the South they must have run up to Canada and they settled in an area where the Irish had migrated, and that's how they took the name Murphy. My grandfather on my father's side was brought up here from Kentucky as a groom for a rich man named Searles. So I come from good parentage with solid roots in this area.

"The trouble was there weren't hardly any black kids where I was brought up. I grew up among whites. It was all right to intermingle when I was a little kid, but when I got into my productive years the parents started to be wary. I was a nice kid but, you know, it was the time when you draw the line. She's black, you're white. It hurt me.

"John wouldn't have been my father and mother's choice for me. He came from a very good family of churchgoers like ours, but John is three shades darker than me. I'm not color conscious, but my father wanted all of us to marry lighter. In fact, he would have liked me to marry the other side. You've got to remember they came from the real old school. They thought things would be easier for us that way.

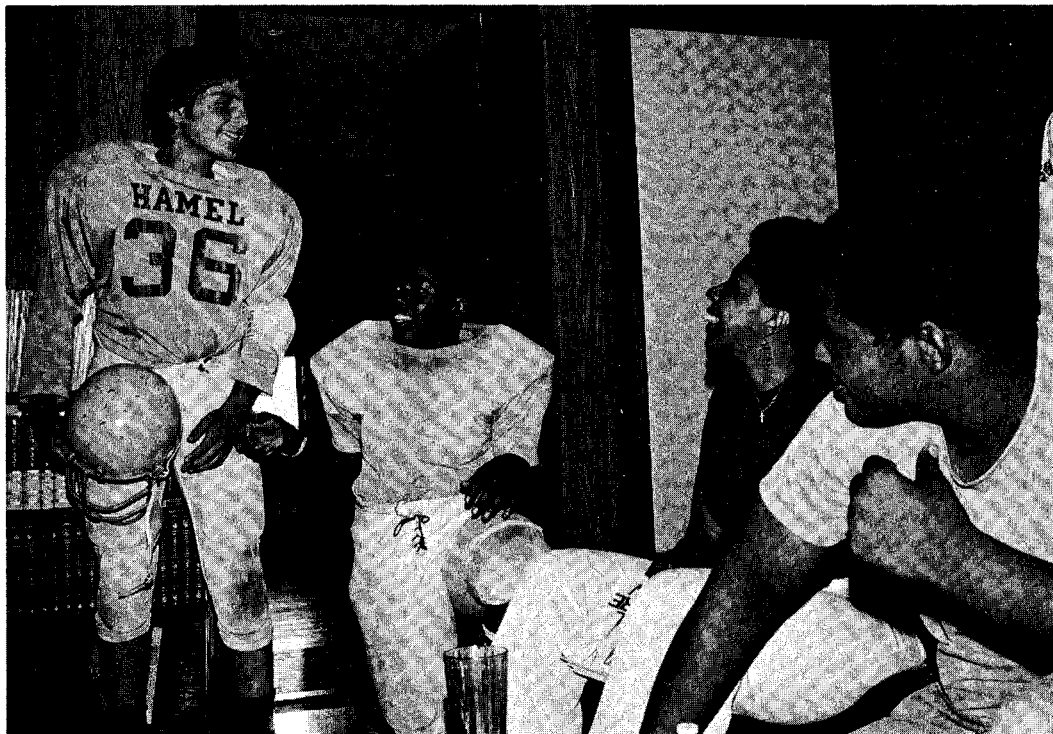
"I wanted my children to grow up in a different environment than me, and that was why I was glad when John picked Haverhill to live in. There are more blacks in Haverhill. I wanted them to be around as many blacks as possible.



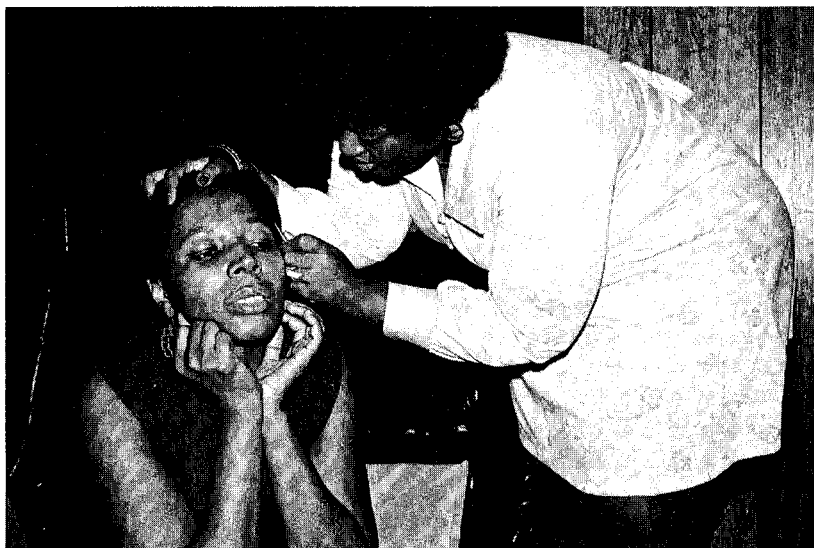
Elks Ball

"I have had to make some adjustments. I grew up as a white, yet I'm black. I had to fight for my place with my people. Some of them still resent me. Everything about me is different from my black brothers and sisters. Most of them are Southern imports, and I don't think like they do. I wish I could and then in some ways I'm glad I don't. I'm not flashy, I don't think it's necessary. I don't like the way they talk. I don't want to talk like that. My father had me take elocution lessons. Yet still I feel that I ought to be able to identify with them. I belong to the local Elks, which is primarily black, and I enjoy going down there and being with my people.

"I have my hangups, yet when it comes to my children intermarrying, I'm as staunch my way as whites are the other way. I don't think there's anything better than a black. I think we enjoy life, that we enjoy the simple things



Friend, Yancy, Irene, John



Robin tweezes Irene's eyebrows.





Irene at work

in life more than whites.

"I'm at my sons all the time about it. Little white girls chase my Nathan from morning to night. I try very hard to be polite to my son's girlfriend, but I don't think I fool her for one minute. I want her to know just where she stands with me. I do resent her. I wish she were black.

"I stopped working five months after I got married. I didn't go back to work until Yancy was born. My husband didn't want me to work. But in the same token, and I'm not being nasty, my husband's cheap. If he earns ten bucks, he'll give it to you but he wants to tell you how to spend it. If I needed underwear or stockings he used to make me wait, and I resented it very much. I'm not someone to ask you more than once. If you turn me down after the first time, I won't ask you again. I put up with it for years, but finally I decided to get a job. I wanted to be more independent. This was fifteen years ago.

"I went over to Western and applied for a job as an IBM operator. When I went into the office I had no thought that I wouldn't be hired. I was skilled (IBM course); I was sure of myself. I was Irene Lambert. I figured here I am you lucky devils.

"There was another girl who applied at the same time and they took her. She had less training than me, but she was white. The time was not right, and I haven't forgotten that. I never have let them forget it either.

"I didn't apply for another job until after Yancy was born and then I went and applied for a job in the plant. I didn't holler discrimination, I went to get a job here, I knew I could get one. I was not as I am now; I wouldn't say five words then, I never spoke up. If you had asked me for an interview I would have said no. I minded my own business fifteen years ago.

"My first job was on the second shift. Work got slack and they wanted me to go on days and I couldn't because Yancy was too young and I was working what we call the mother's shift, so that I wouldn't have to leave Yancy alone for too long. So I stayed out of work until there was an opening on the second shift. I was out three weeks to the day and I came back in again and went to work for Don Darnell.¹ This is, as far as I'm concerned, one supervisor that Western should get rid of, he's a bigot. He doesn't come out with it openly, but he's a bigot.

"When I first started out for him everything was great. I was a tremendous worker. There wasn't a job that he put me on that I didn't make over 130% on. Then he put me on this job called Tenites. They are little plastic things and you used to have to bare strap them. I couldn't do it. If I made the rate, I did poor work. If I did good work, I couldn't make the rate. After doing five or six jobs over the percentage he was going to fire me for not doing well on this one job.

1. This person's name has been changed.

"That did it, I became a union steward. I had joined the union the day I went into the plant. My father's a union musician. He told me the history of unions when I was young, so I've always been very union conscious. But that experience with Don Darnell changed me. I'm very arrogant now. I wasn't that way when I started out. I had to be abused to become that way. When I came in there I was just like the rest of the little sheep ready to be slaughtered. This Don Darnell hurt me. I gave him the best I could.

"I had such a chip on my shoulder after that. There wasn't a grievance I lost in five straight years. Didn't lose one, and I'm up against men who are trained to beat me. The stronger I got, the worse I got. I tell them you had me as a saint and didn't know what to do with me. Now you've got me as a devil and you'll live with it. I'm a product of Western Electric and what they did in that plant.

"I worked hard at being a good steward, and I'm a damn good one. To this day I put a lot into it. When I handle a case I give it my all. I don't short change the people, but I only grieve cases that I believe in. I won't touch you if I think you're wrong, and I'll tell you that. I know a lot of people don't like me. But they come to me with their grievances because they know that if I take it, I'll fight like hell for them.

"The year after I became a steward, I became an officer on the Executive Board. I remained on the Executive Board up until the time I ran for Secretary. I won and was Secretary for four years until I was defeated just about two years ago. When I lost it almost destroyed me. I never lost before. I was crying; I was crushed. I'm not a good loser. I do not like to lose.

"I told the people, you failed me. I never failed you, but you failed me. I was going to resign. But Mike Greico (former President of the local) the love of my life, he told me don't resign, stay a steward, the people still need you. So I stayed a steward.

"Sometimes I don't know why I'm a steward. It's a lonely job. They damn you if you do and they damn you if you don't. You can win 10,000 cases but if you lose one, you're a no good bastard. If the people don't like the contract it's your fault. You're abused by the people, by the company, even the union. But you hang in there. You can't explain it. By rights I should be out of it. I've never received anything for it. No money or anything. The only thing I've received is power, and I enjoy it. I think I enjoy it more because I'm black and I figure I'm up here and these white people are dependent upon me when they've got problems.

"I wouldn't say this is a bad place to work, but there is a lot of phony shit that they do around here that frosts my ass. For example they spend gobs of money on that damn lawn out front, and then they fight like hell to keep from giving people an extra penny. Worse than that is what they go through when they have a visitor. Whenever they have a visitor

they put it on, and you know it's so phony. Sometimes we've got to change our breaks and we're supposed to clean up our area if an "important" visitor is coming through. Hell, if they want to come in let them see me on my break or at work. And cleaning up the area: fuck that. If I can work in the filth they can see it too; they're no better than me.

"As soon as they get rid of that happy horseshit and get down to the business of dealing with the people, that's when they're really going to have something. They need to treat people better. They need to treat you like a human being, not a number. I'm not Irene Lambert in there. I'm #24505.

"Everyone knows they have to work, but don't make people come in with the feeling that, Ugh, here I am again. Let them come in feeling, OK, I've got to work, but I've got my music and I can relax and do my job and this is coming about at least in my department. It's not a big thing but it's a beginning, they've never had it before, and I feel if they can go along in these veins, it will change things. That's why I tell people stand behind John (department chief) because he's sticking his neck out trying to make things better, and a lot of people would like to see these experiments fail.

"I'm not quiet about how I feel. I let everyone know. When the company shrink came, I told him 'Get rid of these God damn green walls. Give these people a little color. Let them come in and see something besides canary yellow or bedpan blue. Give the women a lounge where, if they don't feel too chipper, they can go and hold their heads for a few minutes. Give them the things that make them feel like a human being. There are always those that will take advantage of this and run it into the ground but percentagewise give them the benefit of the doubt and give them a chance. Let them fail before you say they failed.

"Sometimes they forget that we're Western Electric. I tell them you're nothing without us. Stop treating us like we're second class citizens because when the shit comes down and we decide we want to get the hell out of here, there isn't going to be a plant. You can have 1001 buildings all over the country but when the people get fed up with you and decide they want to get out, you've got nothing.

"I thought we had them with national bargaining. We had the power to close the whole country down. We had real power, and we didn't use it, and I'm afraid we'll never have that power again. I didn't want to go out on strike, I really can't afford to, but I was willing to because that was the only way to show them we were serious.

"I don't want to just bad mouth the company...because there are some good things. I haven't hidden them. I keep telling them when I praise you and say you've done something well, it's praise deserved. I wish more people knew Dave Hilder (plant manager). I think he's a good guy, and wants to improve things. We took him to a black dance, and he had a ball.

"However, because there are some good things, don't stop from trying to make things better. I keep them guessing. I threaten them, tell them to shape up or I'll write an editorial. I tell them I know people on the New York Times. They don't know. I know they'd like to get me out of their hair.

"I've been given offers. They don't come right out and say you can have this position but they let you know that you could get up in the office if you want. As far as I'm concerned, this is all frosting on the cake. Fourteen and a half years ago I couldn't put my foot in the door, don't offer it to me now. I'm not going to be no token black. Even though I need the money, I won't sell my soul, and I'd have to. I'd have to conform and I don't know how.

"I tell them, go fly a kite. I don't want it. What would I be? A puppet that they could pull my string? What would my children think of me? Everything I do reflects back on them. Maybe when they grow up, I'll be scared for my job and do all those things. But right now I don't have to. I'm walking tall, ain't got a pot or a window but I'm walking tall. There's nothing they can offer me because I'm my own girl. You can't buy me.

"With everything I've said I know Western has done a lot for me. I've grown through Western. I had my ego thing at Western. I'm well known at Western Electric and because of Western Electric, I'm well known in the community. If I hadn't been at Western, it wouldn't have happened; I made my own little niche. I needed it at the time, I was a nobody because of the situation with my husband and it gave me a feeling of importance. When I leave, and I do intend to leave someday, I'll remember Western for what it has given me.

"The union has meant alot to me too. I've gone to conventions and I'm well known by the heads of the International. When I go to the convention, they all know me. They come down out of the stands and say hello to me and I feel good. They'll say there's Irene Lambert and it's nice. I've met representatives and senators.

"I think my husband resented all this. Here he was telling me I'm nothing and here I was going places, meeting important people who were telling me I was something. I thought I had gained self-confidence from this, but when John left me, I realized I didn't.

"I've had to grow up in the last three years. Now I know I have it. You know I got a lot of it through my children. They're behind me as much as I'm behind them. It's going to be very hard for me to let them go. I know that. I hope I'm big enough to let them go. I've had them with me a long time, and you know how a mother is with her sons. I don't want to be forgotten. I fear this. That's why I feel very guilty about my parents, because I've forgotten them. I feel very close to my children. I think the breakup has made us even closer. When I'm upset they catch it. They know when I'm up and when I'm down.

"My youngest son can cook as well as I can. They all wash, cook, clean, iron the whole bit. I get up tight when they don't do what I want them to. I don't want to come home and find this house dirty because I don't leave it dirty. I haven't cooked supper in weeks because I'm working overtime so supper's waiting when I come home.

"This is the type of house it is, probably a crazy house to other people but it's great to me. I don't think there's anything that I do that they shouldn't do, because they're men, and they're 100% men.

"I'm very strict with them, partly because they could run all over me if I weren't tough with them. I demand top shelf from them. I don't like to ask them to do something more than once. They don't do it and I'm on them. I've hit them. I mean I've literally beaten them with a belt, even the biggest one, and he did not raise his hand to me. This is my way, it may not be right, but it's my way. I want them to obey my discipline, to do as I think is right. If they think I'm wrong we discuss it. If I think they're right I'll tell them, 'OK, I'm sorry I was wrong.' If they have personal problems, tell me. I tell them --talk to me, I'm the only one here.

"I try my best with them. I don't want to make the mistake my parents made with me, but I probably make 10,000 others. I want them to have more than I had but if they don't and they can have with their kids what I've had with them, they got it knocked.

"I'm not saying it's been easy. There have been a lot of problems. Even though there are more blacks in Haverhill than in Andover, there are still very few.

"My youngest, Yancy, he went through hell when we first moved in. He was the only black child in his school. He was NIGGER from the time he went there to the time he came home, five days a week. Everyday I'd be getting a note about how bad Yancy was. I didn't realize what he was going through until he finally came to me and told me how much he hurt. Oh I felt terrible. I felt that I had failed him completely.

"Man, I went to that school and I performed. I gave that principal hell for being insensitive to the problems a black child would have in an all white school. I didn't leave until I knew he understood what they were doing to Yancy. Since then things have turned around. Yancy's gone from failing marks to being a B student. Once he knew that he could go to them when he was threatened and have something done about it, he was all right.

"I've had trouble with the police too. Once they came into my house going after my son because some little white girl accused him of stealing her wallet. They didn't have a warrant or anything. Until they knew I wasn't going to take any crap from them, they were rude to me. I straightened things out and told them to get out of my house. As soon as they left I

called up the Chief of Police and tore into him. I told him, I got news for you, I don't know what you've been doing with other blacks, but your officers are not going to put their hands on my children and get away with it. I told him you ever want to come on my property you better have a warrant or keep your ass out.

"I'm a gentle peace-loving person, but don't mess with my kids. They know that if they're wrong, and I find out, you won't have to come after them because I'll bring them in myself. But when they haven't done anything don't touch them.

"Like I said, my children have been a job to me, and they have been a rock for me, with all the pain John has put me through. I went to a shrink, he couldn't help me because he didn't know...I don't care what anybody says, a white shrink cannot help black people.

"I don't think my husband knows how bad he hurt me. He never abused me physically but he abused me terribly mentally. He had me to the point where I didn't think I was good for anything, and that's a terrible thing to do to another human being.

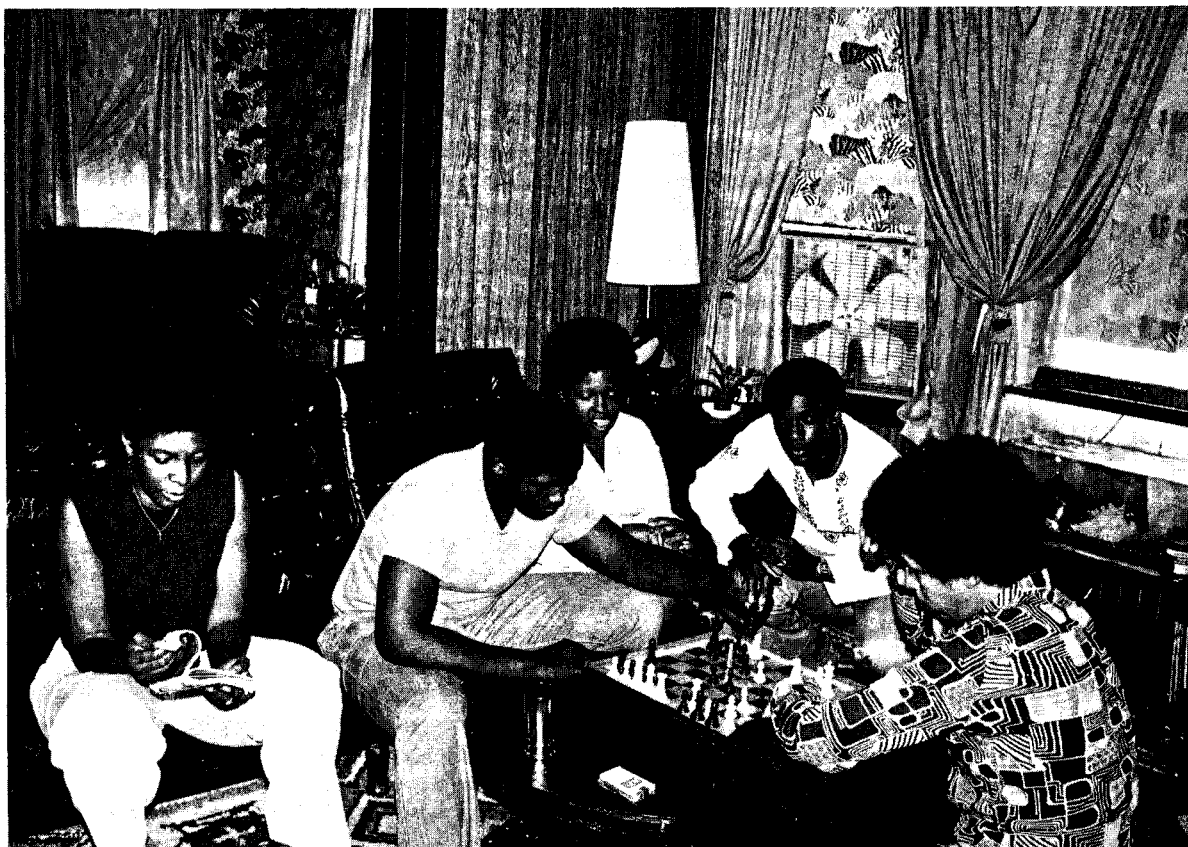
"I went to a black sensitivity program. I didn't come out in the group at first. I sat there and then finally everything came out. I was telling everything to people who could destroy me. Once it came out I could no more stop it than the man in the moon. I really don't believe I could have shut my mouth if I wanted to.

"I think out of the whole group I was the only one who got something out of it. There's a lot of bullshitting in those sensitivity groups but when I finished I felt as though I had taken a bath. I think that it's only since then that I started to heal, really.

"Now I want the headaches and the concerns gone. I want to help my children get started and then I want to find someone. I would like to love again, but I'm afraid to. I wish there were someone who was strong enough who could see what I need and give it to me, and it isn't things, it's time. No one has ever given me their time. My parents never gave it to me. They were too old. I never came first to anybody. My husband didn't give me the time I needed. My children, I do come first to them now, but I won't always come first to them.

"I want to come first with a man and I want to be his total. I don't know if there's any such thing, but I want it, really want it. When I see a couple that's really close, I'm very envious. Sometimes I wonder, when are things going to get better for me? When am I going to go to sleep and sleep a sound sleep?"

Richard J. Bager



Irene, John, Robin, Nathan, and friend

Received in New York on October 24, 1974.