

Chemist Percy Julian pushed past racial barriers — amid attacks on his Oak Park home

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Ron Grossman

He hadn't even moved into the spacious house on North East Avenue when Percy Lavon Julian got an unmistakable message that someone didn't want the internationally renowned scientist living in one of suburban Oak Park's most exclusive neighborhoods. Julian was only the third African-American in the United States to hold a Ph.D. in chemistry.

The fire chief said that the Julian family's home was being renovated when arsonists broke in on Nov. 22, 1950, and splashed gasoline on the walls and floors of its 15 rooms. Failing to light the gasoline with a long gauze fuse, the vandals tossed a kerosene torch through a porch window.

"A neighbor heard the crash of glass and looked in time to see two men driving away in a small dark sedan," the Tribune reported.

Firefighters saved the house. But racism was a daily fact of life for Julian. Eight months later he would be turned away at the downtown Union League Club, where he'd been invited to a luncheon in honor of a white scientist. The venerable Chicago club was off-limits to blacks. Julian saw a link between the snub and incidents like the attack on his house.

"When individuals supposedly in high places behave as the Union League Club has behaved, ordinary citizens of lesser intelligence follow suit," Julian told a Tribune reporter.



After a second attack — a stick of dynamite thrown at his house on June 12, 1951 — Julian explained why he wanted to live in Oak Park: He'd hoped to prevent his two children from experiencing the fear that he'd known in the Jim Crow South.



"But the other night, my little girl

knew fear for the first time in her life," he told the Tribune. "She remembered the bomb and asked someone to come into her bedroom to comfort her so she could go to sleep."

The bombings of the Julian family's home were shocking to many Oak Park residents.

Around that time, blacks were often attacked in white neighborhoods. In 1949, a house on Peoria Street in Chicago was besieged by Englewood residents enraged by the sight of black shop stewards attending a union meeting in a white member's home. In 1951, a mob of 4,000 attacked a Cicero apartment building with a single black tenant.

But Oak Park coveted its image as an enlightened community, a home to the muses. Ernest Hemingway was raised there, and it was the site of the studio where Frank Lloyd Wright designed architectural masterpieces.

So the editors of the Oak Leaves, the village newspaper, were livid when Time magazine picked up the story.

"If it is possible to libel a town, Oak Park was libeled in the last issue of Time, the weekly news magazine, when it reported the shocking attempt to burn the home of Dr. Percy L. Julian," the paper said in an editorial. "There is no evidence of any kind that an Oak Park person or persons had any part in an arson attempt, as Time inferred."

Still, for weeks the newspaper's letters to the editor bore witness that readers were not of one mind about the incident.



A group of local clergy wrote: "It is with a deep sense of humility and shame that we as ministers stand before those within and without our congregations in the presence of such an expression of pagan and un-American hatred and prejudice."

Another reader suggested an alternative to the theory that Julian was the victim of white racists: "Maybe some of his own race are resentful of him for going high-hat on them, moving into the exclusive part of an all-white neighborhood, or for attending a white church, as I'm told he does."

Still another reader noted that the "special pleaders for the Negro race" didn't speak up when a white police officer's house was torched: "But let a Negro be the purported victim, and these gentlemen and ladies don the sack cloth,

order up extra portions of ashes, and go into such an orgy of breast beating and wailing as might try the patience of a Job.”

Yet Julian wasn't a “special pleader.” In 1958, as the Tribune reported, he spoke candidly about social problems in the black community.

“Our Negro crime rate has become so alarming that those of us who have struggled so long to merit freedom are struck dumb with panic,” he told a board meeting of a Chicago YWCA.

His solution to the problem was to provide blacks the kind of educational and professional opportunities he'd had to fight for, tooth and nail. The constant theme of Julian's life was pushing past everyone who told him there were things an African-American couldn't do.

Speaking at an Oak Park school posthumously named for Julian, his daughter Faith Julian recalled in 2018 that after their house was bombed, her parents hired private guards “because they couldn't get police protection.” Julian himself did guard duty, too, stationed under a tree with a shotgun and explaining why to his son, Percy Julian Jr.

His wife, Anna, became the first African-American woman to earn a Ph.D. in sociology.

Three years before he died, Julian reflected on what had made him persevere given the obstacles racism set before him. The occasion was the naming of a chemistry building for Julian at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Ill. At the 1972 dedication, he recalled spending summers as a child on his grandfather's farm in Alabama. One day he and the other farmhands were singing an old spiritual as they worked a cotton field: “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.”

Julian said he asked his great-grandfather about that strange word “balm.” Grandpa Cabe, as he was known, explained that it was a salve to heal wounds and sores. Gilead was a land east of the Jordan River famed for its salves.

The song came from a biblical story about the Prophet Jeremiah being in despair, and the Lord telling him there's always a remedy, a way out — he just had to look for it. “I want you to know that, Sonny, because there is always a way out,” he said his Grandpa Cabe told him.

Julian was destined to create balms. As a chemist he helped develop medical steroids. He found a way to synthesize cortisone from soybeans, resulting in an affordable drug for the legions suffering from arthritis. He similarly transformed soybeans into progesterone, a component of the birth-control pill.

His route to those discoveries began when he peered into the window of a chemistry class in a white high school in Montgomery, Ala. "After that day, dreams of test tubes danced in his head," his daughter said.



There wasn't a high school for blacks in Montgomery, so Julian went to Indiana and enrolled at DePauw University. Although he graduated as his class valedictorian, graduate schools wrote DePauw's dean, suggesting Julian set his sights low, perhaps teach at a black college.

Julian ignored that advice, and his career and academic pursuits would make him a well-traveled man.

He earned a master's degree in chemistry at Harvard, which wouldn't offer him a teaching position. Eventually he earned a doctorate in Vienna. In 1936 he was up for a position at the Institute of Paper Chemistry in Appleton, Wis., but the town had a law prohibiting African-Americans from staying overnight.

Hearing about that slight, the vice president of Glidden hired Julian as the research director of its Soya Products Division in Chicago. Seventeen years — and many patents — later, he opened his own Julian Laboratories in Franklin Park.

By then he was being showered with honors — 19 honorary degrees, induction into the National Academy of Sciences and buildings named for him, such as the one at MacMurray College.

On that occasion he thanked those who helped him: parents, teachers, and Grandpa Cabe, who in a cotton field taught him the meaning of that old spiritual.



"It was then that I made my vow," Julian said, "that I would forever fight to keep hope alive because there is always a way out."

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Percy Julian



Damage to Percy Julian's home (below)

