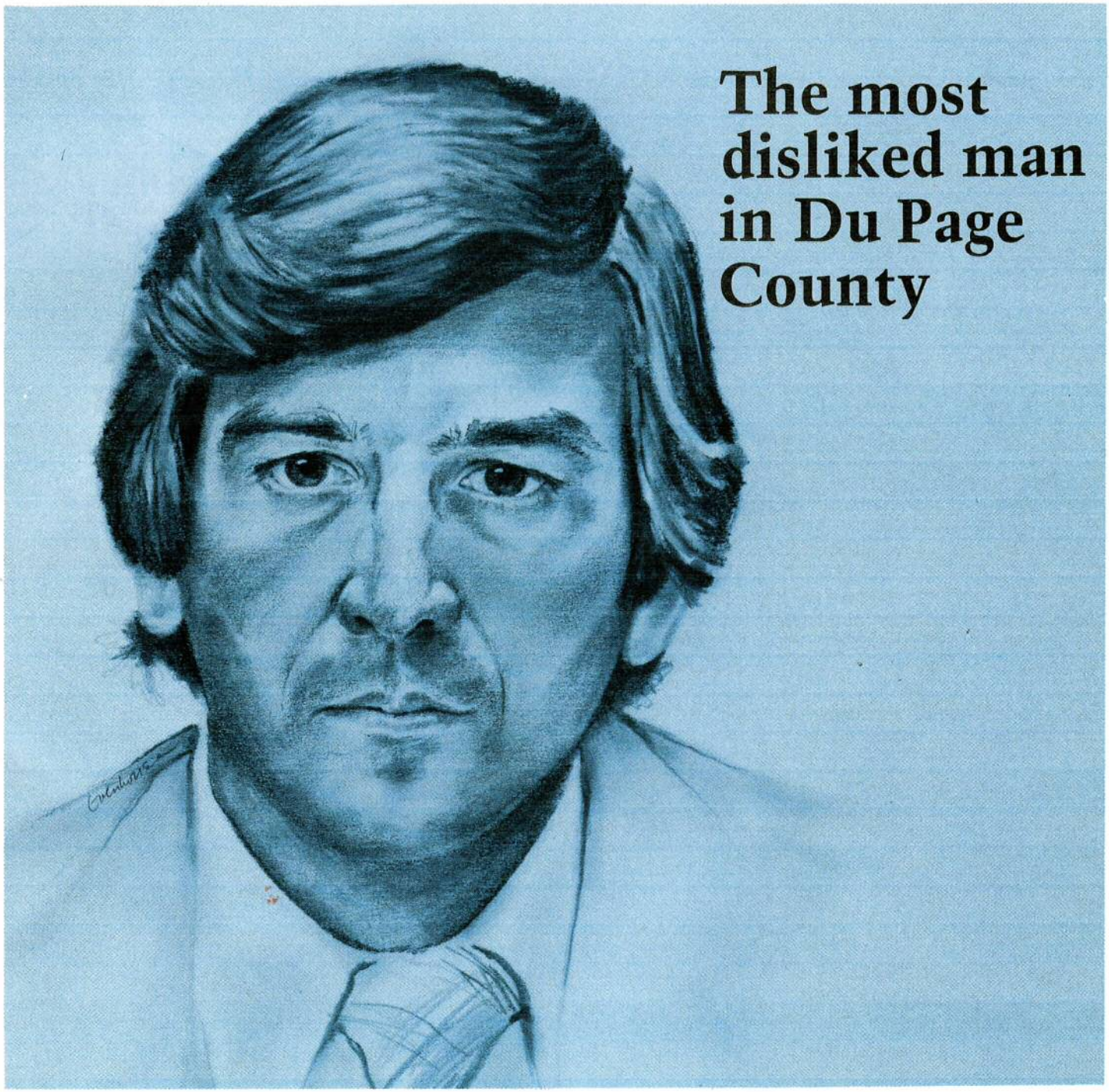
# Salt.

*For grassroots Christians seeking social justice*

*January, 1985*
*$1.25*



## The most disliked man in Du Page County

# The most disliked man in Du Page County

***Bernard Kleina is just an agitator, says one county official. Another suggests that he needs a psychiatrist.***

**Patrick Reardon**

In the little spare time he has, Bernard Kleina takes professional-quality photographs for relaxation, and those photographs are a measure of the man. They are peaceful glimpses of the beauty and simplicity of nature—the brilliant color of a single flower in close-up, for example.

But the tranquility of his photographs is in sharp contrast to the work Kleina does and the reputation it has earned him as "the most disliked man in Du Page County."

Du Page County in the suburbs west of Chicago is by many measures the richest county in Illinois and one of the richest in the nation. It is the home of nearly 700,000 people, nearly all of them white and well-to-do.

For more than a decade, Kleina has been working to change that, angering many county residents and officials in the process. He has been a painful thorn of conscience in their sides. Since 1971, Kleina and the group he heads, HOPE Fair Housing Center, have been working to bring fair housing to Du Page County despite intense opposition from county officials and many county residents.

In 1982, after an 11-year court battle over an anti-discrimination lawsuit filed by HOPE against the county, Federal Judge Hubert Will ruled that county officials had used exclusionary practices to prevent minorities and poor people from living in Du Page County. Will ordered those officials to develop and carry out a plan to provide 1810 low- and moderate-income housing units.

HOPE's victory, however, was short-lived. The county board appealed the decision and dragged its feet in carrying out Will's ruling, despite orders to act on it. Eventually, the U.S. Court of Appeals overturned Will's ruling, and HOPE, unable to afford an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, was forced to drop its lawsuit.

For Kleina and HOPE the fight for fair housing is far from over, and the controversy that has swirled around that effort is far from settled. At the center of that controversy, it is curious to find the soft-spoken, graying, 47-year-old Kleina, as he himself admits. "I don't get into these situations easily. I don't look for trouble," he says. "But I do have a conscience. I do feel I have an obligation to change things for the better.

"I don't think I would be a very controversial person except for the issue I find myself addressing. When I see the kinds of things that go on, I just can't look the other way. Sometimes I wish I could."

For Kleina the commitment to fair housing dates back to his involvement in the civil-rights movement in 1960s "which was like a baptism when I began to realize what needed to be done."

In Selma, Alabama he was arrested for taking part in a civil-rights demonstration. "I was walking down the street with five other individuals, some of whom were black," he recalls. "I was arrested for parading without a permit. They said I was insane, walking with blacks in a white neighborhood in Selma. It was a simple way of showing how crazy the attitudes of racism are."

## Silence from churches

A similar baptism occurred in 1968 for the founders of HOPE who discovered a poor family living in a garage in affluent Du Page County because no subsidized housing was available. Those people found the family a home, Kleina says, adding, "As soon as they took that one step, that opened a whole new vista for them. All kinds of questions started to open up: Why isn't there housing for a family like this in Du Page County? They were very good but very ordinary people.

"It's important for people to take those first steps and not be afraid. You go from the specific to the general philosophy or belief. You're motivated by the compassion or love that you have for that one family in helping them move from a garage to a decent home. If it becomes too philosophical, you can get lost.

"I get lost in issues too unless I'm tied closely to the people who come for help. They keep you on course and give you a sense of direction."

While HOPE gets its funding from donations, many from individual Catholics or Catholic churches, Kleina is critical of religious leaders for failing to take a strong, clear stand on major social issues, such as fair housing.

"If there are churches anywhere, there are churches in Du Page," Kleina says. But with few exceptions they've remained silent throughout this struggle.

"I'm sympathetic because the people in those churches are like us, weak, scared, and unsure of what the future will provide. It doesn't bother me so much that people don't practice their faith. It's very difficult to practice what we believe in.

"What astonishes me is that people don't believe that as Christians we have responsibilities. People separate their religion or belief from their everyday lives. The two are just like ships passing in the night. They don't recognize these beliefs are an integral part of their lives and in everything they do."

Still, Kleina admits, it is not easy.

"I believe I have a sense of what is right, and the confidence to pursue it. At times, especially when opposition is considerable, you do keep questioning: Who's right? Who's wrong? You do have to have that confidence to stick with what you believe in.

"Housing does play a very important part in our lives. If people are always concerned about making ends meet, about keeping the rats and bugs away from the kids, they can't live a full life."

For his efforts, Kleina is described by one county official as an agitator and by another as in need of a psychiatrist. A editorial in the local newspaper of the Du Page County community of Downers Grove began with this assertion: "It's a pretty fair bet that Bernard Kleina . . . is the most disliked man in Du Page County."

Charles Vaughn, a county board member, characterizes Kleina as a "zealot" but one who believes in what he advocates.

Nonetheless, Vaughn argues, "I think Mr. Kleina sees a lot of evil that doesn't exist. He invents and creates dishonesty, bad notions, and racism beyond what there is. In one respect, he's doing what he thinks is right, but, in another sense, he's loose with the truth. We've taken very large steps in this county; and when we bring up a proposal, instead of saying we've made progress, he says, 'I don't like any of this.' "

To such criticism, Kleina responds, "We have never seen the county provide even one housing unit after all these years. I'm not interested in plans that don't go anywhere. People don't live in housing studies."

## Frustrations aplenty

The effort to bring subsidized housing to Du Page County has been a wearying uphill journey for Kleina. "County officials have taken advantage of us whenever they could. They've put us through the mill on this," he says. "My only regret is that I'm probably too easy on the county.

"I never feel like we're doing an adequate job for our clients. We can win a court case and still not give even one of the plaintiffs something concrete.

"The frustration is the time it takes to do what must be done. I have to be careful when I take stock to look beyond our relationship with the county which can be most depressing at times. If all HOPE did, if all I did, was battle against the county, I would be a very frustrated person."

Other more successful efforts by HOPE include housing counseling for about 1400 low-income and minority families each year who are trying to find or keep housing in the county. "Many of our minority clients," Kleina says, "are not low-income at all, but they're still discriminated against simply on the basis of their color."

To tackle this discrimination the HOPE staff of Kleina, two other full-time workers, and one part-time worker oversee a legal-action program aimed at gathering evidence against landlords who discriminate and taking them to court. Key to this process is the use of "testers"—black and white volunteers and HOPE staff members who apply separately for the same apartment. In more than half of the cases, the white person or couple will be offered the apartment. But the black person or couple will be told that the apartment is no longer available or will be quoted a higher rent.

Since 1969 HOPE has filed about 50 such complaints, all of which have been won or settled successfully out of court, often with both cash payments and a promise by the landlord to discriminate no more. In one case, the owner of a 62-unit development agreed to pay $28,200 in damages and to establish a strong affirmative-action program to settle a HOPE lawsuit.

"It's becoming very costly for people to discriminate, and we're trying to make it as costly as possible," Kleina says. "We hope that word gets around that we're testing, and we hope that word gets around that damages are high. We're not going to make it easy."

What also helps Kleina keep going, he says, is the support he receives from his wife, friends, family, and co-workers. Each year, 600 to 700 families contribute money to HOPE, and 80 to 100 people volunteer for the organization.

In addition, Kleina says, "To do what I'm doing at all successfully, I have to spend a long time thinking about it and assuring myself that what I'm doing is right. I do read the Scriptures from time to time, not as often as I should, to get that assurance too. And just being able to get out and walk around and think—when I see the beauty around me, that is support for me."

It is Kleina's strong belief that the racism behind discrimination is as destructive to whites as it is to blacks, Hispanics, and the poor. "The only difference," he says, "is that it's within the power of the white people to change it.

"Racism is a form of fear and hatred, and those two, more than anything else, prevent people from accomplishing what they might. HOPE as an organization is doing something for whites as well as for blacks and Hispanics."

In a way, Kleina says, what he does is also for himself:

"I have a compassion for people. I don't think that I could be comfortable sitting around watching other people suffer. We all have a contribution to make. I feel I have a share in that responsibility, and I don't feel I can shirk that responsibility.

"I don't want to come across like I've got the answers. It's not that. I look at it as a talent I have, and what talents we have we had better use or we will be very frustrated.

"I consider myself a pretty ordinary person. If I can do it, anybody can do it."■