

Diversity in Houston

Richard Errol Evans

Professional Biography

Individuals who cherished education and recognized its value and usefulness in a society that was almost totally influenced by individuals who represented the elite have always influenced me. My Aunt Theresa Stewart was the principal at Blackshear Elementary School, my Aunt Sally taught at E.O. Smith Jr. High, my uncle Charles taught elementary school in Houston before migrating to Los Angeles where he taught and became an administrator before retiring in 1996. My cousin Eddie Mason became the first black to be awarded a General Motors dealership in the State of Texas, my Uncle Woodrow, who eventually became an assistant to the county medical examiner, had the distinction of being the youngest licensed embalmer in the State of Texas.

My goal was to become someone who had something to offer to society, therefore, I explored several avenues that would lead me down the path of success. I became a social worker for an organization that was an arm of the Federal Government; the local affiliate was the Harris County Community Action Association under the wing of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Unfortunately our agency came under intense fire from the Republicans under the leadership of Richard Nixon. Mr. Nixon hired Howard Phillips to dismantle our agency and while this dispute was in litigation, I chose to explore other avenues.

God works in mysterious ways. This particular scenario led me to H.I.S.D. where I became a teacher of government, history, and economics. What a twist of fate, this happened to have been the most significant event of my life. I became a teacher and realized after one year that this was the single most important event to have ever occurred in my young life. This beyond a shadow of a doubt was my reason for being. Teaching was and still is my calling.

Former students who are presently in their twenties, thirties, and early forties still come back to say thanks. They often come back to say that they chose a particular profession because of me. They still say, "Mr. Evans, I will never forget you!" This is my most significant contribution and accomplishment in education. There is no greater reward than a vote of confidence from your students both present and former. Another rewarding experience was to be voted favorite senior teacher 24 of 26 years, including the 1999 school year.

The irony in this scenario is the fact that the vast majority of students who voted for me were Anglo. This was quite surprising due to the fact that I was teaching in predominantly white school during segregation. This fact is significant only because of what I experienced in the not so distant past, a past that sometimes leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Consequently, I still lived a beautiful life thanks to my parents who were

heaven sent. How lucky can a person be? Because my family unit was so strong, I was able to live a comfortable life in a not so comfortable society.

Restrictions were everywhere, in the schools, department stores, social events, athletics, and various other events. Every facet of my life was controlled outside of the family setting. Blacks could attend certain events only at specific times allowed by law. The Houston Livestock Show, then called the "Fat Stock Show" allowed blacks to attend only one show per season. The amusement park, "Playland Park" allowed blacks to be admitted one day per year, the nineteenth of June. This was the date that slaves in Texas were told that they had been freed, two years after slavery had ended in the United States. June-teenth as blacks refer to it, was the most celebrated holiday observed by blacks other than Christmas.

The doors of opportunity were closed all around and there was not much anyone could do about it. My family remained strong through legal and strictly enforced segregation. Life was very ugly at times. Having to endure nasty name calling, witnessing police brutality, hearing my father being called "boy" by someone half his age, being denied admittance to certain stores, having to step out of line if a white person walked up, and being called "nigger" were all humiliating experiences. I can recall sitting in a car at the River Oaks bowling lanes waiting for a friend who worked there, when a policeman came to us and wanted to know why were we "niggers" were in the area. He stated that some boys were seen stealing hubcaps in the area.

Over time, blacks in Houston began to assert themselves in a way that was unusual in Houston. They began protesting in the early sixties and partitioning for their rights. Jim Crow laws were being attacked; boycotts and sit-ins became the battle plan. Peaceful demonstrations that were used across the country were now employed in Houston. Protest on college campuses against Jim Crow as well as America's involvement in Vietnam became commonplace. Riots in the S.W.A.C.(Southwestern Athletic Conference) system became frequent and sometimes volatile as young blacks began to voice their displeasure of the segregated society of which they were growing tired of. Riots at Jackson State Univ. in Mississippi and Texas Southern Univ. in Houston set the tone for what was to come.

Prospectus

After 250 years of slavery; followed by the Jim Crow era of legal segregation, blacks in today's society have equal rights under the law, but they are otherwise far from equal. Compared to whites, African-Americans are far more likely to live in poverty, twice as likely to be unable to find a job, experience a higher infant mortality rate and almost seven times as likely to be sentenced to death if convicted of an interracial murder. There has always been two Americas, one for whites and one for blacks.

There appears to be a lack of understanding or a different interpretation of how far African-Americans have come in their struggle for equality in today's America. My major point of interest is to examine ways to bring about inclusion for African-Americans and other minorities without alienating those who might suggest that America is where it

should be in this area, and who feel that African-Americans and other minority groups are asking for too much.

As teachers we must find ways to cultivate learning about contributions from those who are not members of the majority. In my opinion, we are slowly re-segregating either in action or in thought. New problems are sure to arise if we do not use the resources available to us to educate everyone about each other. It is important that we recognize the opportunity that we offer each other. Social and political isolation is obviously a thing of the past. We are intrinsically linked socio-economically and socio-politically. The greater Houston area has grown steadily the last two decades, reaching a population of 3.7 million and becoming one of the nation's 10 largest metropolitan areas. This growth has included the development of ethnically diverse communities. Despite ethnic differences, and the potential for inter-group tension that these differences entail, the Houston area's diverse residents have many common problems and priorities. The long-term well being of Houston's residents will be largely shaped by them to forge a common agenda, a partnership for the future. The future affords an opportunity for the area ethnic communities to come together and address social, culture, and political issues affecting our communities.

DIVERSITY

Individualism is a commitment to self-reliance, material accumulation, and a private economic system.

Diversity holds that individual differences should be respected and that these differences are a source of strength and a legitimate basis of self-interest.

Unity is the belief that Americans are one people and form an indivisible union.

At the 1992 Republican convention in Houston, Patrick J. Buchanan announced the coming of a block-by-block war to take back our culture. Buchanan was right, a cultural war is upon us and that this fight will be a Central American preoccupation now that the cold war is over. The symptoms of cultural decay are all round us, but the last people in the world we should be blaming are recent immigrants.

There appears to be an attempt to redirect attention to a new group of individuals who might become a threat to the existing infrastructure. The greatest number of new immigrants are people of Spanish speaking countries. When these individuals are assimilated into mainstream American life; what will their impact be on the existing political system?

DISCUSSION

In theory, Americans are equal in their rights, but in reality, they are not equal now nor have they ever been equal. Blacks, women, Hispanics, the disabled, and members of other minority groups have been victims of discrimination. Black Americans were the most obviously disadvantaged group and in some circumstances they still are. For example, despite the legal prohibitions on discrimination in housing, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, Houston remained highly segregated. Neighborhoods were mostly of one race, therefore schools based the neighborhood school concept were typically not integrated. White, Blacks and Browns were strictly confined to their own geographical boundaries.

Another reason for the persistence of segregated housing patterns was the fact that economic conditions of most black families was greatly inferior to that of most white families.

As years passed, some blacks and other minorities experienced upward mobility and began moving out of traditional segregated neighborhoods. This process often involved a tactic called “block busting”. As a result of block busting the “white flight” originated. White flight was the physical movement of white families to the suburbs in an effort to get away from the blacks that eventually moved into the once all white neighborhoods. Although progress was being made, low socio-economic status was also a factor in where some blacks and other minorities could afford to live.

Ethnicity is a major source of sub-cultural identification in the United States as well as in Houston. Jews, African-Americans, and other ethnic groups think of themselves as having customs, language, beliefs, and values distinctive in many ways of those of the dominant culture. Take Hispanic-Americans, for example, who in 1990 made up nearly 9% of the U. S. population. Today in Houston there are approximately 500,000 Hispanics. They comprise over 100,000 of the 210,000 students of the Houston Independent School District. Their cultural roots lie in Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Central and South America. Nevertheless, these varied cultures have common threads that distinguish Hispanics from the Anglo-American mainstream.

Hispanic culture emphasizes obligation, loyalty, and respect toward the family, political ambition and career. In the Hispanic cultural, family means the exhibition toward the family that includes not just parents and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins by blood or by marriage. Hispanics also place a high value on the dignity and self-worth of the individual. They value their separate beliefs, customs, and culture identities. They prefer to retain their group boundaries while enjoying free and equal participation in politics and the economy.

GOAL:

To make a concerted effort to help bring these mostly foreign born children into the American cultural fold, while teaching them awareness and respect for cultural diversity. Public school teachers are obligated to “accurately portray the cultural and racial

diversity of our society while stressing the centrality of Western Civilization as the source of American political institution, laws, and ideology.”

This teaching goal in Houston and elsewhere in the United States highlights a tension that has long existed in American society. On one hand, there are social forces that encourage assimilation, but on the other hand, there are tendencies to preserve cultural diversity and the act to keep one’s own personal heritage alive and to respect the right of others to do so.

PROBLEM:

There are two main reasons that some societies remain culturally diverse over long periods of time. One reason is that minorities do not want to assimilate into the dominant culture or the set values, norms, traditions, and outlooks that are treated as normal for the society as a whole. In Houston, although the schools, subdivisions, and social settings are legally integrated, individuals in general still live in their own separate worlds. To be more specific, even though we interact with each other, we continue to live in two different worlds. The distinctive norms value knowledge, language, and symbols that members of a cultural minority share. These norms are used to distinguish themselves from the dominant culture that constitutes a subculture. This subculture sometimes creates discord and animosity among different groups. This could be because we have not yet learned to accept and appreciate the cultural and religious differences that are evident in our society.

SOLUTION:

We must “teach each about the other” and this can be accomplished through our actions rather than with words and legislation.

DISCUSSION— CURRICULUM UNIT GOALS:

The purpose of this unit is not to exacerbate an already thorny situation, but rather its intent is to hopefully speed up the process of healing. There is no reason to point fingers and to assign blame on any one group, but it is everyone’s obligation to assume the responsibility of making a one-person effort to erase the cause of racial polarization, animosity, and persecution. Peaceful social, economic, religious, and political co-existence can occur, but not until each individual says to himself or herself that it must stop!

We must walk the talk. As individuals we must accept the realization that no one can be free unless all are free, as President Kennedy proclaimed in Germany at the Berlin Wall. We have our Berlin Wall right here in Houston and throughout America. We allow division and sometimes appear to welcome it. We can not look the same, act the same, nor think the same, but we are first and foremost Americans.

There has been serious allegation and in some instances evidence that cannot be refuted of racial profiling by the police, court system, and the private sector; along with these allegations come denial. Some groups are saying that they are being singled out and are denied their opportunity to receive their piece of the political and economic pie, again denial! Others are saying that most high paying jobs or positions in the job market are often denied to certain groups even if the educational and skill levels commensurate with the dominant group, again denial! Until we examine ourselves closely and be more honest with ourselves, we will remain in a state of denial.

It is incumbent for teachers to skillfully teach and blend inclusion into our lessons whenever the opportunity presents itself. We should never cram our causes down someone else's throat, for it only causes them to gag. We must let everyone know that every entity in our not so homogeneous society is an import cog in the wheel. Until we as individuals make a concerted effort to teach our children and then hold them responsible for their actions, nothing will change. We must afford all of our children an equal and equitable opportunity to succeed.

INCLUSION:

The barriers of legal segregation are gone and struck down by very significant decisions from the courts. Both *de facto* and in most instances, *de jure* segregation is not the obvious obstacle for minorities in Houston, which is extremely diverse and progressive and by luck and pluck escaped the tumultuous social upheaval that plagued and destroyed the social infrastructure of a lot of cities. In Houston, the majority of our social organizations, churches, and schools are open to all, but our mindset is sometimes remains segregated. Until there is no more overt and organized xenophobia, the beauty of the salad bowl will wilt into a soggy mess.

Until our instructional activities include contributions from blacks, brown, whites, and Asians who are making significant economic strides and are slowly ebbing the way into the social and political infrastructure, we will continue to misunderstand and fail to accept each other as equal.

We must find a way to prevent the continuation of the legal system's perpetuation of division among the races with its no so blind justice and assignment of punishment. Diversity and all of its beauty will be a lost opportunity to make Houston and example of what teamwork can accomplish. Through teamwork, we can correct very complex and cancerous problems that we have collectively created.

HISPANICS AND INCLUSION:

Since the mid-1970's Texas-Mexicans have found it necessary to moderate their politics. Throughout the country, a slide to the political right and a return to consensus politics have been obvious. This draft had its origin in the late 1960's when the liberal politics of the Lyndon Johnson's era began to erode before and uprising by hippies, members of the new left, black nationalists, anti-Vietnam war demonstrators, and other elements. A backlash from middle America against radicalism, ethnic chauvinism, the counter culture, welfare programs, and other aspects of liberal politics insured a decline of a historical epoch and produced a new direction for the 1970's. By the 1980's there seemed present in American politics a genuine sentiment to replace the cultural and political legacy of the sixties and early seventies with moderation.

A greater willingness among Mexican-Americans to work with the Democrats and Republicans, therefore replaced the confrontational style of the Chicano movement after 1975. However, it was during this period of moderation that the Houston community registered its most significant socio-economic and political gains.

The political standing of Mexican-Americans in the Houston community in the 1980's stands in marked contrast to the period before the 1970's when only Laura Cruz held any significant elected office. Recent history tells a different story even though political incumbency is still restricted to those positions representing predominantly Latino areas, as is the pattern throughout most of the state. Elected officers having Mexican-American incumbents include the judiciary, justice of the peace court, law enforcement, the city council, the school board, and the state legislature. Both blacks and Hispanics have made significant gains in the areas mentioned.

Indeed, as in the black community, the good fortune of a few has eluded the majority of Mexican-Americans and Central-American Houstonians. The number of Hispanics students in H.I.S.D. continue to increase. They make-up the majority of the district's population, with African-Americans being second and Anglos third. Unfortunately, a high dropout rate somewhat nullifies the gains made in the numbers. Furthermore, conditions of poverty have been exacerbated with an incredible rise of illegal and undocumented immigration from Mexico and from Central American countries. Consequently, the struggle within the Hispanic community for social justice continues. Assimilation is a profound kind of poverty because it forfeits our uniqueness both personal and cultural. One can never be authentically American and Latino but are forced to be either an excluded minority or an assimilated individualist. Latinos tend to choose liberation, which means to be both Latino and American, the promise of fulfilling the principles upon which this nation is founded. Perhaps the greatest contribution will be to witness to the right of each person to be a half in a community of equals that is committed to each other's advancement because they love others as themselves.

Getting to Know You

I. Participants are assigned rules and a problem at the outset: then they are divided into three groups: and finally members of a group are to role play their approaches to the solution of their problem in front of the other groups.

The optimum numbers of people taking part in this simulation is 15, but as many as 30 can participate. 20 minutes

1. Explain to the participants that the goal of the simulation is to arrive at better understanding the situations that members of one ethnic group might face more frequent than those of another ethnic group.
2. Distribute examples of some problems or situations that are more common among certain groups:

Examples:

- A. drop out rate
- B. incarceration
- C. unemployment
- D. single parents
- E. police abuse-real or perceived
- F. housing
- G. participation in government or politics
- H. stereotypes

20 minutes—This is to be done without any conversation or interaction.
Distribute cases and worksheets and allow each participant to respond in writing to the case, situation or study that he or she has.

II. Discussing the Situation

The extent of the group discussion at the conclusion of the simulation will depend on the workshop or class setting in which it is used. It is always a good idea to allow some time for debriefing, some time for a participant to ask about the role or even protest other's responses.

III.

1. Redistribute the studies or cases so that each group receives a different set of case studies.
2. Divide each group. Half the group will assume the role of a group that is different from their own (minority) the other half will assume the role of the majority. Each of the 3 subgroups will go to a different part of the room Participants are to prepare to role-play the case they have been given.

Works Cited

Abalos, David. Latinos in the United States. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986.