

Many Faces, One Family

BY DALE ROGERS MARSHALL, PRESIDENT

Last spring the campus grappled with the issue of multicultural diversity. I decided then to talk more forcefully at Convocation and AutumnFest about this issue, using then-Governor Christine Todd Whitman's motto for New Jersey: "Many Faces, One Family." But equality and inclusiveness are issues I come to with deep conviction based on personal experience and professional interest.

I grew up in the '50s in Washington, D.C. In that era, the nation's capital was segregated. My father, William P. Rogers, was deputy attorney general and then attorney general in the Eisenhower administration. He participated in the decision to use the National Guard to protect African-American students at Little Rock's Central High School.

I went to a private Quaker school, Sidwell Friends, which was segregated. Ralph Bunche, the first African-American winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was undersecretary general of the United Nations. His child passed all Sidwell's entrance exams, but was turned away because of race. That to me was an outrage. I protested the decision to the principal. That injustice activated me and had a major influence on my life. It shaped my choice of fields—urban politics—and my own research on black and Hispanic politics.

Today when we discuss race and ethnicity in my urban politics class, some white students say that there is too much emphasis on these issues now. They say that progress from the civil rights movement has eliminated the problems of prejudice and discrimination. Unfortunately, this view, no matter how well intentioned, is wrong. Discrimination still exists in many forms—often invisible to whites and all too visible to people of color. Recognizing these systemic biases is an important step in eliminating them, which is in everyone's interest.

Wheaton's own history demonstrates both the importance of inclusiveness and how difficult an issue it can be. This institution was a pioneer in opening up educational opportunities for women. When Wheaton opened its doors, women had fewer rights than male inmates of insane asylums: Women couldn't attend college, vote, own property, enter the professions, or serve on juries. Wheaton's decision in 1987 to include men was consis-



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tent with our tradition of opening up educational opportunities. And it strengthened the college.

Unfortunately, Wheaton was not a leader in regard to race. In 1902 Booker T. Washington was a preeminent black leader in this country, yet his daughter was rejected by Wheaton. It wasn't until after 1945 that Wheaton trustees approved admitting African-Americans. Just a year before, Wheaton had admitted a Japanese-American student—Momo Nagano '47 (profiled in these pages in the Fall/Winter 2000 issue)—when many other

schools refused to do so.

Gradually colleges and universities in this country reduced the barriers of race, class, gender and religion. And at each new stage of inclusiveness, the old guard felt threatened and predicted dire consequences. But to the contrary, the changes were not only consistent with America's belief in equal opportunity, they also have made colleges and universities more lively intellectual communities.

Several recent studies show that diversity improves learning. A broad range of experiences and perspectives provides interactions important for developing critical thinking and leadership skills. And our own graduates confirm these studies. They often tell me how much they valued getting to know people from different backgrounds. When author James Carroll S'65 spoke at Honors Convocation last spring, he challenged us to create a better society, to argue respectfully, and to act collectively.

Like Jim Carroll, I believe change is possible and that racial and ethnic discrimination is not inevitable. In fact, I see the proof of it everywhere, here at Wheaton and even at my old high school. The new chair of Wheaton's Board of Trustees is Patricia King '63, a law professor at Georgetown Law School and my new boss. She is the first graduate to chair Wheaton's board, as well as the first woman and the first African-American to do so. Pat and her husband, Roger Wilkins, have a daughter in high school, my old high school, Sidwell Friends. She is a star there. Integrated Sidwell is a much better place.

Change is possible. It happened at Sidwell Friends; it happened at Wheaton. I look forward to working collaboratively with all of you to bring more change to Wheaton so that we are truly a community of many faces, one family.