

## Article

### Dee Grayson's speech at the Gender Equity Institute, September 22, 2000

#### Introduction

In September it was my privilege to be at Northeastern University with the current grantees for the "Gender Equity Mini-Grants Program", funded by the Caroline and Sigmund Schott Foundation. This program has awarded over \$250,000 in grants to 23 teams of teachers to support the development of gender healthy public schools in Boston and Cambridge. It has also awarded funds to the very capable staff at the Gender and Diversities Institute at Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) to provide training to the teacher teams. In my opinion, this effort represents an exemplary model for other districts and communities as well as funding sources. I applaud the foundation president, Greg Jobin-Leeds and the project manager, Shirley Mark at the Schott Foundation and want to express my appreciation to Susan J. Smith, the Project Director from EDC and all of the staff for including me as they launched the 2000-2001 activities. I have a great deal of respect for the EDC Institute staff and the equity assistance they have provided through the work of the federally-funded Women's Educational Act (WEEA) Resource Center during the last twenty years. It was an honor to be asked to share the following remarks which were part of my Keynote address:

#### "Equity: The Key to Excellence"

Dolores A. Grayson, Ph.D.

In a recent interview, Kerry Kennedy Cuomo discussed a new book she has written on people who have spent their lives working for civil and human rights and social justice issues. She identified some of the characteristics the people in her book had in common. The first item was courage, the next was a deep and abiding love for people, the third was a sense of responsibility and a need to be of service to others and finally, she stressed that all of the people in her book had a profound spiritual connection or belief in a universal force or spiritual source.

In considering these characteristics, I reflected on the people who had touched my life directly or indirectly during the last fifty years, especially those affiliated with civil rights. I grew up at a time (during the fifties) and in a part of the country (North Carolina) where the movement and its landmark events helped shape my sense of fairness and unfairness, justice and injustice.

I'm two generations removed from the Choctaw Reservation in Philadelphia, Mississippi, on my Father's side of the family and I remember when a young African American man my age was hanged in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. His name was Emmett Till and we were 12 or 14, and I remember my Dad saying that nothing would happen to the white men involved and I felt angry and hoped my Dad was wrong. He wasn't. I remember when Governor Wallace stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama and I was a teenager when Governor Faubus tried to

prevent nine students from going to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. I learned at a young age what it means to have the foxes in charge of the chicken house. As George Orwell had said in *Animal Farm*, "...all were equal, but some were more equal than others." The headlines were full of history in the making. I thought about all of these incidents and I was struck by some of the societal shifts these events helped bring about in less than fifty years. Not as much as most of us would hope, but certainly some changes have taken place.

In February, 1960, I was a college student in Greensboro, N.C., when a group of African American students from A&T College staged the first sit-in at the local Woolworth's lunch counter. Claudette Graves was a classmate of mine who was one of the first black students to integrate the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (formerly the Women's College of the University of North Carolina). She had gone to high school with two of the organizers and made us aware of the significance of this courageous act on the part of our peers. This was the event that brought Dr. Martin Luther King to Greensboro and preceded the Birmingham Boycott and the march on Selma. It was a turning point in my social consciousness and I'm grateful for the impact it had on all of our lives. Last summer when I received the alumni magazine, it had Claudette's picture on the front honoring the forty-year anniversary of the Sit-ins. It is indicative of societal change that Claudette Graves Burroughs-White is currently a member of the Greensboro City Council.

As I prepared for this presentation I considered the power of the title. During the last several years it has become more and more popular to use the words equity and excellence as though they might be mutually exclusive. As the school improvement and educational reform efforts have gained higher visibility in the media and in political circles, we hear a lot about excellence with tag lines about equity or diversity. For our purposes here I want to emphasize that I feel very strongly that equity must be a criterion for excellence. That means that any efforts toward educational excellence or workplace excellence or societal and community excellence, however defined, must include equity as a requirement. For example, all planning efforts need to include an equity impact analysis. What are the issues of fairness and how will all people involved be affected or impacted by the decision, program, practice, facility, policy, etc. being changed, designed or implemented.

I considered the recent past and present and examples of equity related stories of excellence and courage and I was confronted with the event that was on center stage globally at the time of this speech, the 2000 Sydney Olympics. For example, when the Olympics were last held in Australia in Melbourne in 1956, 10% of the athletes were women. In Sydney where they celebrated 100 years of women's participation in the Olympics, just under 40% of all athletes were women. No one could describe the impact of the young Aborigine woman, Kathy Freeman, chosen to light the torch at the opening ceremony, representative of a 50,000 year old indigenous population and the symbolism inherent in her selection. Other equity related examples of excellence included the youngest participant, a 12 year old swimmer, Fatima, a Muslim female from the Arabian country of Bahrain and the fact that she was even permitted to compete. And the young man who watched the strobe light to start his races in swimming because he couldn't hear the audio signal. He won a silver medal in his event. And the young woman who is "legally blind" who made the finals in the 1500 meter race. How about Anthony Irvin, the first gold medal swimmer of African American descent and his teammate, Gary Hall, who copes with diabetes and tied with Anthony for the gold medal. There was the young woman swimmer for the U.S. who has Acopecia, a condition that prevents growth of hair. She swam the semifinal heat in the 4 x100 relay, then climbed out of the pool and proudly displayed her shaved head, no hat, no scarf. She explained to the announcers that she used to worry about being seen bald. Then she decided to embrace her condition. How's that for courage and a healthy attitude about self- image?

Most of us have heard about Jesse Owens and his four medals and the conditions under which he won them in Hitler's Germany. Then in 1979 I met a woman named Helen Stephens. She was a runner and had participated in the same Berlin Olympics and had won three medals. She explained that in 1936, women were limited to the number of events in which they could compete. Well, that's not the case in 2000 as we watched Marion Jones go for five and Jenny Thompson increase her number of medals to 10, the most medals ever won by any American female. In Sidney we had women pioneers in

weightlifting, water polo and pole vaulting. As a former all-state softball and basketball player, it occurred to me that we have come a long way from half-court basketball and two dribbles! (Restrictions that some of you may remember). There are numerous equity-related stories of excellence which involve courage, and love and heart and a sense of responsibility and being empowered.

When we think of excellence we usually associate words and phrases like quality, high standards, high expectations, achievement and success. In education we have indicators of excellence. Traditionally, we consider the top three to five percent, measured in a totally competitive way against others and limited to a few. By these standards, are only the medal winners achieving excellence? How about the young man from Ethiopia who completed 100 meters when he only started swimming three months before the Olympics and had never seen a fifty meter pool before he got to Sydney? Did he achieve excellence?

There is a need for a more inclusive approach to educational excellence, to the way we define it and the ways we measure and assess it - definitions and measurements that include equity, that consider civil rights and human rights for all of our students and employees. By definition, equality means same or comparable and most of our anti-discrimination mandates address the areas in which there are tangible needs for equality. These include comparable opportunities, facilities, budgets, equipment, qualified teachers and coaches and access to a range of classes addressing advanced as well as remedial skill levels. We need on-going procedures, policies and monitoring of these efforts to ensure equality. And we need to move beyond the equality levels which meet the letter of the laws to the equity levels which exemplify the spirit of the laws. Equity by definition is related to fairness and justice. We need to continue to strive for more fair treatment of students, more relevant course content and more reflective and honest educational materials.

Almost fifty years ago we decided that separate was not equal with the landmark ruling in 1954, Brown vs. the Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas. As discussed earlier, this decision initiated some major changes and a number of legal mandates regarding race, ethnicity, gender, disability, language, socio-economic status and other parallel equity concerns. During the last twenty-five years there has been a great deal of research related to schooling, classroom practices, instruction, curriculum and the learning and work environment and the correlation to achievement or excellence. We know much more than we have ever known about educating females and males from diverse populations, backgrounds and cultures. In my work on Generating Expectations for Student Achievement (GESA), I've concentrated on perceptions, expectations, interactions and achievement with an emphasis on gender, ethnicity and other equity influences. We've identified major areas of disparity, research based classroom strategies and new ways of measuring excellence. The educational equity movement has resulted in the consideration of diverse ways of knowing and processing and learning. It is an acknowledged fact that people process information differently and whether one is reading studies rooted in feminist pedagogy, learning styles, multiple intelligence or brain research, we have accepted the need for alternative and authentic assessment. Equity related research is no longer marginalized. In educational research, we have expanded from exclusive quantitative studies to recognize the significance of qualitative, ethnographic and phenomenological data. We know that multiple modalities are the most effective. The difficulties often arise from our inability and/or unwillingness to apply and use our own research.

We need to do a better job of linking research to practice and that's one of the reasons that all of your projects funded by the Schott Foundation are so important. The evaluation or "reflective action research " component is critical to ensuring that the

lessons learned about gender equity can be shared, as pointed out by Maria Paz B. Avery, the project director for the evaluation component. In this way, the projects can build leadership and increase advocacy for gender equity in the Boston and Cambridge public schools and serve as a model for other areas.

I was asked to include what I perceived to be areas of major movement around the country related to excellence with equity as a key ingredient. As I've indicated in my previous comments, accountability and assessment for increased standards are a primary target area. In addition, I would include technology and processing information and work and career preparation. These are the areas of interest that are driving policy and decision-makers and much of the funding.

The emerging equity related issues and challenges include the recent attempt at polarization in the media and the practice of featuring selective research such as Christine Hoff Summer's work in which she pits male issues against female issues. I find it ironic that she attempts to challenge and counter research on gender equity by such respected stalwarts as my friend and colleague, the late Myra Sadker. Myra was one of the first researchers to address the cost of sex bias for boys and girls. In fact, some of the very facts Sommers quotes regarding her alleged war on boys are the results of biases first identified by Myra in her early Report Cards on schools. Anyone who is familiar with the work of those of us who have been involved in this research area for over twenty-five years knows that there are two sides to the gender equity coin. In my own work, I've always stressed the importance of looking at gender disparity impact on females and males and the psychological and emotional prices paid by anyone who scores high on Sex Role Stereotype (SRS) assessments and attribution scales. Since the 80's when Sandra Bem developed the Sex Role Inventory (SRI) appraisal, psychologists have known that high scores for either extreme were predictors for psychological and emotional difficulties. These have been validated as predictors of such difficulties and for males who score high on SRS assessments, the odds are greater that the path may lead to criminal and violent behavior.

This leads to another emerging issue, which is the area of violence and safety at school and in the workplace. It is time to move beyond conflict resolution and apply what we've learned in a more preventative way at earlier stages of intervention. Other emerging research and media issues include pitting racial, ethnic and cultural groups against each other; a focus on indigenous populations vs. settler/developer populations vs. newcomers/immigrants and the cross cultural conflicts, changing culture and gender roles, the blending and separation of traditions and language concerns.

For those of us who work on equity the focus must be on mutual respect, dignity, understanding, harmony and unity. That's why your efforts are so important. They are solution oriented and designed as capacity-building models at the local level. As indicated in the beginning, involvement in this work will continue to take courage, love, a sense of responsibility and service to others, spiritual centeredness and a sincere belief in excellence for all.

We know that we've come a long way when we find ourselves in the spotlight of the media, challenged by detractors, targeted for funding cuts and misquoted by those seeking self-aggrandizement and publicity. In closing, I suggest we remember a story about Mary McLeod Bethune. When she was a young teacher, teaching youngsters for whom the public education system had not been designed, she had a small boarding school on a dirt road. In those days when the Night Riders would ride in their sheets, many residents would turn off all of their lights and blow out their candles to give the impression that no one was home, so the riders would go by without stopping. On this particular night, they heard the noise as the riders approached their house. The students

ran to turn off the lights, but Mary McLeod Bethune stopped them. As she moved toward the door and reached to hold their hands, she reportedly said, "Turn on the lights, we're home tonight". To those who would divide us, distract us, demean us or belittle us, we say - Get used to the light - we're home!