

LETTER FROM THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITOR

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I write these words of introduction, appropriately enough, on January 19, 2004—Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. This year marks the 75th anniversary of his birth. There are other important anniversaries occurring this year: May 17th is the 50th anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed segregation in public schools; May 23rd marks the 45th anniversary of the first Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) policy proposal prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, color, or creed in social work educational programs; and July 2nd is the 40th anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that desegregated higher education. This special issue of *Reflections* was conceived as a time of taking stock—to see where we have come from and where we are now in the struggle for social equality—with particular attention to how the helping professions themselves have done in this regard.

The history of segregation and desegregation in the helping profession has long been a research interest of mine, and the impetus for this special issue arose out of that research. Twelve contributors share their first-hand experiences of the impact of racism and discrimination during their formative years; in their undergraduate and graduate professional education; in their subsequent careers as practitioners, educators, researchers, and advocates; and in their personal roles such as spouse and parent. The authors' own cultural backgrounds are diverse, coming from African American, Latina, and White (including Scottish, German/Irish, and Greek) ethnic groups and heritage. The helping systems the authors write about include social services and

child welfare, juvenile court and probation, education (primary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate school), housing, mental health, nonprofit community organizations such as the YWCA, religious organizations and churches, and professional accrediting organizations. The authors and/or subjects of these narratives come from interdisciplinary backgrounds, including social work, nursing, and lay religious studies. Among the unique articles in this issue are the following:

- *Brown's* impact on Black high school students attending segregated schools in 1954, their choice of whether to transfer to hostile, previously all-White schools or remain in nurturing Black schools, and the subsequent impact of this decision on later life opportunities, decisions, and career choices are explored by two authors. John Oliver shares the richness and perceived limitations of having received secondary education in a segregated, Black high school. Sandra Edmonds Crew interweaves her own personal story of integrating a previously all-White high school with the initial findings of a qualitative research study on a cohort of Black former high schools students in Virginia.

- Two articles by social work pioneers in multicultural practice, Elaine Pinderhughes and Jean Granger, chart their evolving understanding of multiculturalism in social work practice and educational settings, based on their own personal encounters with racism and oppression, and in their professional work with clients, trainees, and colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds.

- Georgia Burnette shares her own story and those of three colleagues as African American women in the nursing profession,

seeking admission to nursing schools and work opportunities in hospitals, physician offices, and health clinics.

- Ruby Gourdine examines her experiences as an African American social worker in child welfare and juvenile court in working with White social workers and Black social workers, and the role each played in her subsequent professional development. In addition, she recounts her courageous work in publicly exposing segregated practices in a juvenile court in the South.

- Overlooked, forgotten, and/or previously hidden histories are recalled in the works of several authors: Rebecca Lopez shares her discovery of the *Mendez v. Westminster* desegregation case in California, a Latino precursor to the later *Brown* decision; Annie Woodley Brown shares her experiences regarding the impact that Lester Blackwell Granger of the National Urban League had in encouraging generations of African Americans to enter social work in order to fight for social justice; Katherine Kendall (former Executive Director of CSWE) recounts her early work as a caseworker in Louisiana in working with poor, disenfranchised Black clients during segregation, and her later work with Whitney Young, Jr. in developing the first CSWE organizational policies and accrediting standards in social work education prohibiting discrimination based on race, ethnicity, color, or creed; and John Kayser provides an oral history account of the Bishop Tuttle School of Social Work, an all-but-forgotten training program for African American women, as seen through the life of one of its last graduates, Mrs. Fannie Jeffrey.

- Two current social work students provide contemporary accounts of the continuing presence of racism and racial conflict within the helping professions, social services, and higher education. Mercelle Seale-Pierce shares the experiences that she and her husband had, an African American

couple, in attempting to adopt an African American child through the public social service system. Chrissy Davis tells of the impact she experienced, as a young African American undergraduate student, when racial slurs and derogatory comments about people of color were allowed to go unchallenged in a predominately White social work program.

- As a bonus addition to the 12 personal narratives described above, Agathi Glezakos reviews a recent film, *The Human Stain*, for its portrayal and insights into racial and ethnic identity conflict, and the effects of racism and oppression on individual characters as well as on an institution of higher education.

The painful stories shared in this issue are infrequently told. For people of color to share these stories means revisiting hurt, anger, grief, loss, and sadness experienced from their encounters with racism. For Whites, it means listening to stories that challenge the psychological benefits and privileges that they have received by virtue of being members of the dominant, majority group. This silence of stories and the suppression of history have perpetuated ignorance of the truth about the tragic cost of racism to both Whites and people of color in the helping professions.

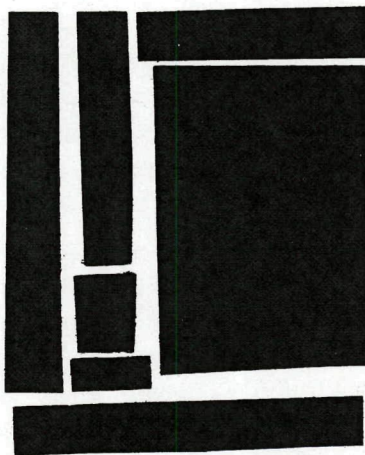
My hope is that this special issue helps us talk about these issues and histories more forthrightly and honestly, as they have affected our own discipline groups and ourselves. These stories help us honor the struggle and the pain of our contributors, while also learning about the strengths, coping and survival strategies, and advocacy efforts they displayed in finding ways to combat racism, injustice, and oppression. Despite (or perhaps because of) the obstacles authors encountered, each of them embraced a career in the helping professions as a means to effect social change and achieve social equality. Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, their stories help us take stock.

My thanks to Jillian Jimenez, editor of *Reflections*, and John Oliver, director of the

Department of Social Work at California State University Long Beach, for their support and advice in developing this issue, and their courage in publishing it. Special thanks goes to Dr. Virginia Gill, an African American alumna of the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver, who first stimulated my interest in this topic, and to Charles T. Morrissey, an oral history consultant working out of the Oral History Project at the Baylor School of Medicine, who has taught me a great deal about oral history methods and research.

A final word on the use of photos in this issue. When segregation was legally practiced in the United States, many professional education programs in public and private colleges and universities required applicants to submit a personal photo along with their application materials. The photos subsequently were used as a means of identifying and excluding persons of color. As a deliberate counterpoint to this practice, I requested from each author a photo either of themselves or one related to their narrative story. While not all authors replied to this request, the inclusion of photos in this issue is meant as one more way to acknowledging the diversity and history of people within the helping professions.

Editors Note: Reflections would like to express deep appreciation to John Kayser for his creation of this important issue commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Because of his commitment, this issue represents a significant contribution to our mission, to social work and allied professions, and to those whose voices have previously been silenced.



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