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Diversity's best leaders take their own affirmative actions

By Linda S. Wallace

PHILADELPHIA - This year, women knocked on the door of the Augusta National Golf Club, but didn't get in. So in an act of heroism, Thomas H. Wyman, a 25-year member of Augusta National and former chief executive of CBS, resigned in protest.

In a world where words often are the preferred weapon, his selfless act stands out: Not every American would be willing to give up a privilege until everyone can qualify for it.

This month, African-American leaders, media pundits, and even President George Bush gave Trent Lott a refresher in history: Segregation was, and is, a bad thing, and most Americans don't recall those days fondly.

Yet where were many of those passionate voices when Michigan State University held a graduation ceremony for black seniors last spring? Why were many antisegregationists silent?

Michigan State's first Black Celebratory was an optional ceremony designed, in part, to give special recognition to the achievement of black students, according to organizers. Ethnic graduation ceremonies are becoming quite fashionable on diversity-conscious campuses. Some institutions that glorify diversity now offer commencement ceremonies for blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, native Americans, Filipinos, and gay and lesbian students.

The goal, really is admirable, though the path is full of unintended risk. Administrators seek to develop more inclusive ceremonies that add vibrant color and texture to a graduation exercise. By creating special ceremonies, however, these institutions marginalize special populations, and remind whites that people of color are not like them. Why not simply modify commencement festivities to reflect a more multi-ethnic generation of graduates? As it now stands, white students are not getting a real say in the change process, and that should outrage us all.

Not every graduate who could opt to attend the "special" ceremony for them - some criticized these ceremonies as segregation. America should honor these young people who stood for America, and for equal justice. Like Mr. Wyman, they gave up privilege for the greater good.

Americans committed to taking affirmative actions, and making a personal sacrifice, are diversity's most effective and authentic leaders. Their actions serve to remind us that the battle to live up to our forefathers' belief that all men are created equal is not waged only in Congress or in the judicial system: Plenty of drama unfolds daily on our streets, at slumber parties, on the basketball courts, at schools, at religious institutions, and in the offices of corporate decisionmakers.

The difference is, when these decisions are made - whom to hire, where to shop, how to select a doctor, a lawyer, or a real estate agent - the TV cameras aren't rolling, and there are no referees to monitor the games of life.

So if we feel progress isn't occurring as quickly as we'd like, we don't need to send another letter to Congress or pass another law. Instead, each of us needs to review our deeds and words, and those of our neighbors. We could set a powerful example for the world in 2002, by embracing an affirmative action policy that asks each American to act daily on behalf of liberty, justice, and freedom.

If each of us pledges to promote tolerance and fairness, right wrongs we witness, or halt bullying and all types of discriminatory acts - including those committed against the poor, the geeks, fat people, physically challenged Americans, gays and lesbians, and Muslims, it would make America a more democratic place.

People who engage in affirmative actions must:

- Challenge stereotypes and seek out facts. They challenge statements made about race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation that are based on opinions, assumptions, or inferences and are, therefore, likely to be biased. If a neighbor says, "Most young black men are drug dealers," or "Trent Lott is a racist" they offer a series of thoughtful questions aimed at finding the truth. "Where did you get your information? Who's your source? Where is your proof?"
- Educate bullies. If they hear someone use an ethnic slur, or bullies belittle someone, or sexual harassers degrade women, they put them on notice that, as a people, we stand united. And they say, "As an American, it is my duty to challenge anyone who would diminish this nation by weakening its support of its democratic principles. I'll ask you to please show this country a little more respect by respecting all its people."
- Model the behavior they want to see in others. They respect people of all types, are tolerant, and work and play well with others. When they argue with each other about race, they speak as though their mothers are listening to them - and try to make mom proud.
- Share mistakes with other people. When someone offends them, they take a moment to share a mistake they made with that person and focus dialogue on personal growth, and not on dispensing justice.

When Americans finally accept that they, ultimately, are responsible for their country, there will be a far greater opportunity to get the dialogue on race unstuck. We don't need a presidential panel of experts to tell us what we already know: If we, the people, are the problem, then we, the people, can be the solution.

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