

Reflection On Civic Action

FROM MY PERSPECTIVE - Diane McClure Holsenbeck

The Class of 1968's Fiftieth Reunion Yearbook both astounded and gratified me as I read numerous entries that included CIC, (Community Involvement Council), in the lists of undergraduate activities. For me participating in CIC was a natural choice. My parents and grandparents planted concern for the needy by example.

Sophomore year ('65-'66) a middle schooler from North Philadelphia came weekly to Sargeant Hall where I tutored him in Spanish since I had lived in Cuba and Mexico as a child. Amos' mother accompanied him, anxious that her son might be mistaken for a gang member and shot en route. Ponder her fear. It was resurrected for me 26 years later in 1991 when I met the mother of a scholarship student from North Philadelphia who graduated from Andover. He had been accepted at Penn, Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton. Gwen would not allow him to enroll in an urban college, insisting he go to Princeton where " my son will be safe from stray bullets intended for a gang member. " (Interestingly he majored in Anthropology, a tiny department at Princeton, which necessitated his taking a course at Penn after all.) But my question of white male classmates is this: what was your parents' concern when you enrolled at Penn in West Philadelphia? Did you think that our few classmates of color were safer than you?

Mayor Rizzo dispatched armies of " Philadelphia's finest " to North Philadelphia station where a Penn student ('69) from Helena Montana mistakenly disembarked. Indeed, the late sixties were ripe for the issues of Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Vietnam War Protests. That is why I asked Counterparts to sing a couple of songs from our time at Penn when the Legacy Garden was dedicated during our 50th reunion. They told me the one by Joan Baez entered their repertoire thereafter.

My husband and I learned many lessons regarding civic responsibility through membership on non-profit boards. They include the Community Service Society that has addressed the root causes of poverty and the working poor since 1843 and the Correctional Association, the only organization in New York granted largely unrestricted access to prisons since 1846.

Nevertheless, the most fulfilling commitment stems from eight years (1998-2006) working with children at risk in Harlem. I drew on everything I had done in education including co-founding a school. To this day, a former colleague and I dedicate 2-5 hours weekly advocating for a student from that program. Fritz's father died when he was 3 and mother when he was 16, at which time he lost housing and became a child of the streets. The faculty considered Fritz to have the utmost potential but he disappeared from school. At 18, Fritz was drawn into minor participation in a crime for which he received a grossly excessive sentence of ten years without adequate legal representation. A year prior at 17, Fritz witnessed a murder by a Blood. He was offered protection by the D.A. for his testimony. The D.A. climbed the ladder and forgot his promise. It is an example of " No good deed goes unpunished." Consequently Fritz's life has been at risk while in prison. Finally, this September 2020 Albany took notice and rewarded Fritz's eight years of barely surviving a very broken system, and moved him for the 11th time in 7 years to a facility where he can touch a tree, look up at the sky, and pursue the GED he not only richly deserves but fervently desires. He has written over 1,000 pages about his incarceration, his personal story, that needs to be published.

In this time it could be a 21st century voice, much as Pauli Murray's SONG IN A WEARY THROAT is arguably the foremost 20th century voice for both racial injustice and gender inequality. While she was the first African American woman to receive a PhD from Yale Law School she was denied housing at Yale due to gender and housing in New Haven near campus due to race, two minor examples from her long life of accomplishment despite unimaginable obstacles.

Pursuing the issues of our time at Penn has been like climbing a cinder cone, two steps forward and one backward. It reminds me of walking the property of a close friend during her son's three deployments to Iraq as a Marine. He returned "safely" like my father and his two brothers did from WWII, but he has been unemployed since his final return.

Covid 19 has definitely suspended many of our generation's former civic responsibilities and opportunities, but we can increase financial support, put pen to paper, and serve our country's desperate needs because opportunities lurk despite having graduated way back in 1968.

