

Affirmative Actions

by Katrice L. Mines

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n March 31, 2003, I traveled to Washington, D.C., with a group of Bowling Green State University and University of Toledo activists, for what I imagined would be one of the most memorable experiences of my life. We were on our way to the steps of the Supreme Court to rally in support of as our country's "forced system of equality"—Affirmative Action. On April 1, the high court's nine justices would hear arguments for and against affirmative action as it applies to college admissions. Justices were asked to decide whether a state has a "compelling interest" to promote a diverse student body or whether the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th

Amendment forbids giving one ethnic group or minority special advantages over another. In a staggered caravan of more than 20 buses from Michigan and Ohio, we slept through the night (in our marching clothes—cameras and rally signs in tow), hoping that our presence on the mall, like other great civil rights assemblies, would once again make a positive difference for future generations. As we neared the Supreme Court just before 7 a.m., walking in clusters of three or four, we began to chant "separate but equal" is a lie ... affirmative action must not die!" Already the feeling of history was overwhelming. I felt as if I was walking only a few days behind my elders who marched on Aug. 28, 1963. I felt the uncertainty of the future on my shoulders and did not take its weight lightly. And somehow, I felt strong. Despite the war in Iraq, we had not forgotten that life in this country must continue to move forward, and that we must make strides for liberty and justice in our own land.

A day earlier, a fellow news reporter had asked me if affirmative action had ever directly helped me. My reply was an unequivocal "yes!" The career opportunity that bridged my three years between undergraduate school and graduate study had come about by what I call "affirmative action chance." I was, I'm sure, not as qualified as the employer had hoped, but filling a quota got my foot in the door. There was little minority representation within the company, and accusations of discrimination were becoming more difficult to ignore. I was qualified, not in the "old boys school" model that had been designed, but capable nonetheless.

The Gospel According to the People

Under cloudy skies we huddled at the steps of the nation's highest court as the crowd grew from hundreds to thousands of supporters from all around the country. By 9 a.m., there was no place to step freely. Signs hoisted, students and groups from the University of California at Berkeley, University of Tennessee, Boston, Brown University, Langston University, Howard University, Hampton University, Texas, Towson University, Nebraska, North Carolina A & T, the NAACP, National Lawyers Guild, University of Cincinnati, New Jersey and many others, swayed together to the echo of BAWM chants. BAWM—the Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action and Integration and First for Equality. By Any

Means Necessary—had been the organizer behind this urgent gathering.

Crews from several news outlets pushed through the crowd and The Tom Joyner Morning Show, featuring Joyner, Tavis Smiley and Jay Anthony Brown were broadcasting their radio program from the rally. I spoke to my neighbors as if we had made the journey to the point in our lives together. Jean Carson, a woman who had marched with Dr. King decades earlier, had been watching me feverishly try to document all of what was happening around us and encouraged me to savor the moments of this day. "Forty years ago, I marched ... for this same issue," she said. "Today I have grandchildren, and I am back because I must stand up so history does not repeat itself." Her words were exactly what I had expected out of this experience. And my enlightenment did not stop there.

Speakers including, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Judge Greg Mathis, NAACP President Kwesi Mfume, march organizer Shanta Driver, Michael Dyson, as well as a number of student, employment and social organization leaders admonished us to hold strong to our hope for better times. Rev. Jackson, a civil rights pioneer, reminisced of the 1963 March on Washington, calling this day's demonstration its continuation. "The struggle for justice is not over, the struggle for our votes to count is not over, the struggle for families is not over ... the struggle for equality is not over," he said.

The experience for many students, like myself, was momentous. Tiffany Williams, who stood next to me in the crowd, said she drove nearly 12 hours with a group of classmates from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tenn., to show her support in person.

"Affirmative action is not something I take lightly as a black woman trying to get a chance in the world," she said.

Acknowledging the fact at affirmative action is not just an issue that affects minorities, Rev. Al Sharpton also challenged the audience and the court to understand the work towards racial, social and economic balance that is being threatened. "They say we don't need special treatment," he said. "We need special treatment for special mistreatment." And then we marched.

My First March

At the top of the hill leading down to the Lincoln Memorial we were invigorated by the sound of Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong singing "War ... what is it good for? Absolutely nothing." We sang in unison and marched to the beat of history on repeat. Assembled one last time (this day) for directions toward the future, we were admonished again to hold fast to this battle for space and value in our society, and I was inspired to my part.

As we walked back to the metro, I was immediately aware of every aching muscle in my body; the feeling, however, was too surreal to undermine with physicality. I could not complain about anything as I looked back over my shoulder at the crowd retracing the steps of our daylong pilgrimage. I imagined again what it must have been like for our elders and predecessors nearly 40 years earlier.

My (sense of monumental) presumption had not failed me. This day was the most extraordinary time of my life.

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"Forty years ago, I marched ..."
FOR THIS SAME ISSUE

—JEAN CARSON