Names on A Wall – A Perspective on Why Diversity Matters

The following article appeared in the newsletter of the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS). It was written by SACNAS President William Yska Velez and is reprinted with permission. For more information, write to SACNAS, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064 or visit their website at <www.sacnas.org>.

I have always found the Vietnam War Memorial, in Washington, D.C., to be an emotional place for me. Vivid in my mind still, after all these years, is the picture of my mother, Julia, and my girlfriend, Bernice, saying goodbye to me on March 25, 1968, at the airport, as I went off to Long Beach to be assigned some ship in the Navy. I was one of the fortunate ones who returned home.

On my many trips to D.C., I often take the time to pass by that wall and acknowledge the fact that so many gave their lives when this country called. But this last trip had even more meaning for me than usual. Bernice mentioned to me that, if you place your hand anywhere on that wall, your hand will touch a Hispanic name! Bernice was right. Almost anywhere you place your hand, we are there.

What if there were such a wall at your place of work? Suppose that you built a wall which listed, in chronological order, all those who had worked in your laboratory, taken your classes, or were on your faculty or staff. How far down this list would we have to look in order to see a Garcia or a Begay? Perhaps we would never find one of these names.

And yet, on the Vietnam War Memorial, we are there, from the beginning to the end. This disparity that exists between our representation on the Vietnam War Memorial and our representation on the fictitious walls that represent the scientific and technological workplace is all too real. This disparity is of such proportions that something has had to be done.

Over the years, programs have been formulated and put into action. One of those was Affirmative Action. But we are now told that Affirmative Action programs go against equal access, that a color-blind society has no need of them. Touch the Vietnam War Memorial. Go back and touch your wall. Different make-ups, aren’t they. Color-blind society? Equal access? The Vietnam War Memorial, were it colored by our skin, would be all too brown, and we simply have had too much access to the honor of death for our country.

Affirmative Action programs are now under attack. Lawsuits now clamor for equal treatment, for equal access. Access to what? To medical schools, to law schools, to entrance to prestigious universities. Where are your clamors to be included in the killing fields, in the ranks of farm laborers, in the sweat shops, and in the kitchens of our fast-fried loaves?

The disparity that I have mentioned is still with us, and it will take many years of hard work to remedy this situation. This work must come both from inside our communities and from outside of them. First of all, our cultures must realize that it is education that is the great equalizer. Our children, and their parents, must be convinced to take an active role in this educational endeavor.

Secondly, our community needs information and encouragement. They need to know about the many opportunities that are available. They need to have positive role models that exemplify success through hard work and dedication. One of SACNAS’ aims is to highlight these role models through the many projects that we sponsor. Information that is useful to our communities is harder to obtain, but even here many organizations are dedicating themselves to providing this information to us.

I am proud of the outreach that these organizations have directed to us. But this outreach puts a responsibility on us. An outstretched hand, feeling only empty space, will soon be withdrawn. If we do not respond with our interest in their opportunities, we may decrease their interest in reaching out to us….With that same enthusiasm with which we shake the hand of an old friend, let us also accept this outreach.

Officer Nominations

Beginning April 1, Sigma Xi’s Committee on Nominations will begin selecting at least two nominees, one of whom will be elected by the November 1997 Assembly of Delegates, to serve as president-elect of the Society beginning from July 1, 1998, and as president of Sigma Xi from July 1, 1999, to June 30, 2000.

Also, the committee will select at least two nominees, one of whom will be elected at the Fall 1997 Annual Meeting, to serve a four-year term as treasurer of Sigma Xi starting July 1, 1998.

Finally, the committee will select at least six nominees, two of whom will be elected at the Fall 1997 Annual Meeting, to serve three-year terms as directors-at-large on the Society’s Board of Directors beginning July 1, 1998.

Sigma Xi members are urged to submit names of nominees for these positions to the Committee on Nominations via headquarters. Nomination forms are available through headquarters by calling 800-243-6534, by e-mail at cote-nominations@sigmaxi.org, or on the Sigma Xi home page at <www.sigmaxi.org>.