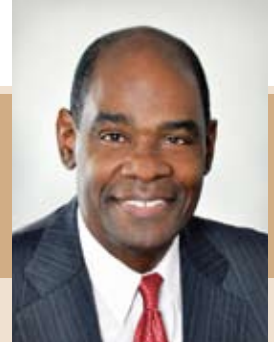


# Diversity Matters

## A Personal Journey



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**D**uring my inaugural address at the SBM Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids, I shared with those present my personal story and how I came to be a lawyer. Since then, I've received many requests for a copy of my speech, which is largely reproduced in this month's President's Page. I'll expand on the main theme of diversity and related matters in the months to come.

My personal journey with diversity and inclusion begins in a small town near Birmingham, Alabama, where my parents met and married in the early 1950s. People of modest means but big believers in making the most of life's opportunities, my parents held no formal college or university degrees, but did have PhDs in hard work and common sense. Sadly, in that day, having a PhD in common sense and hard work (or in any profession or vocation for that matter) seldom translated into opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds in Birmingham, and dreams of being part of mainstream America were, to borrow a phrase from the African-American poet Langston Hughes, "dreams deferred."

Like millions of families of color after World War II, my parents headed north in search of better opportunities for themselves and their babies. We were among the first families of color to move into our neighborhood on Detroit's east side. I have fond memories of that diverse neighborhood. Tony and his wife, both of Italian descent, owned and operated the local shoe repair business; Rev. Albert and his family, of African-American descent, lived directly across the street; Ms. Beauregard, of English descent, lived next door to the Alberts; Mr. and Mrs. Hopush, of Dutch descent, lived three doors to our left; and the corner store was owned and operated by Eddie and his wife, of Polish descent.

In that day, our neighborhood was just that—a neighborhood, one where families looked out for one another. Trouble on the block belonged to the entire neighborhood, not just to the family at whose house it occurred. When I caused trouble, an adult neighbor would reprimand me at the point of incident and by the time I arrived home, one or both of my parents would have been fully briefed and prepared to deliver the consequences.

My old neighborhood was where I learned important lessons fostered by my parents and reinforced by other parents and my teachers: that hard work, playing by the rules, and stepping up to opportunities were the keystones to a brighter future. Even then, I knew that our little neighborhood on Detroit's east side, while not perfect, was a long way from Birmingham, Alabama—not only in terms of distance, but in terms of texture of life.

Two events transformed my life during my teens and led to experiences that I could not have imagined as a youngster from Detroit's east side. While in the eighth grade and walking through the hallways of Barbour Junior High School, Willie Merriweather, a teacher (and former All-American basketball player at Purdue University), approached me and, looking at me eye-to-eye, asked, "Young man, why have I not seen your 6-foot-4 frame in gym class?"

"Sir," I explained as respectfully as I could, "I am a cellist, and my orchestra class meets at the same time that gym class is held."

Mr. Merriweather convinced Coach Jerry Leon to allow me to start working out with the basketball team after school hours. I was not an instant success. In fact, I stank. I had no skills, no understanding of the game, no appreciation for offensive patterns or defensive maneuvers. But I persevered. I played as hard as I knew how. I listened, watched, and learned as much as I could as quickly as I could.

One day during a basketball game against Knudson Junior High School, to my delight and surprise, enlightenment arrived! I don't remember the particulars of my own performance, and that's not really important. What I remember, and what is important, is that I was able to contribute to the success of the team during that game and for the rest of the season, and that someone had given me an opportunity to do so by learning a sport and by developing my skills.

That opportunity was the path to becoming something bigger than myself—a member of a team that won three consecutive high school basketball state championships, a member of successful Ivy League basketball teams, a draft pick of the Boston Celtics and, ultimately, a member of professional basketball teams in Europe and South America. What matters most in all of this is not

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the awards and trophies and the like; rather, it is that I was given an opportunity to step outside of my old neighborhood and experience a bigger and more diverse slice of life. Someone reached out, on faith, and said, "Here, let's see what you can do."

The other transformational teenage experience was my participation in A Better Chance (ABC) and my attendance at the Shattuck School. When conceived, ABC was a bold educational initiative to identify talented, less-privileged youngsters—black, white, and brown from urban and rural communities, including Appalachia, the Bible Belt, and the Corn Belt communities of our country—to become students in private boarding schools in preparation for college and career work. My chance came while sitting in Mrs. Jackson's math class at Barbour. One day, a student entered the classroom and handed Mrs. Jackson a note, which she read aloud: "Boys and girls, if any of you would be interested in learning more about attending a boarding school, you are to report to the principal's office after class."

I can't speak for my classmates, but I did not have a clue as to what a boarding school was, but joined others and went to the principal's office to find out. The principal explained that interested students would be required to take a series of standardized tests and if admitted to the program, would move away from home to live at a boarding school in another part of the country. With that explanation, the level of interest or fascination among my classmates dwindled. As I recall, four or five of us eventually took the exams and submitted related application materials. Lucky for me that I was in class that day.

A short time later, a letter arrived confirming my admission to Shattuck School in Faribault, Minnesota, a farming community of approximately 17,000 people located roughly 50 miles south of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Without knowing anything in particular about Faribault, I had no doubt that it was indeed a long way from the east side of Detroit and a long way from Birmingham, Alabama.

As a prelude to attending Shattuck, I spent the summer of 1967 at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts with 50 other ABC youngsters from different parts of the country. Before Williamstown, my only travel

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beyond my neighborhood, other than an occasional trip across the Detroit River into Windsor and across town to visit cousins who lived near the old Olympia Stadium, was our annual family trip to visit relatives near Birmingham. So off I went to Williams-town, apprehensive to be sure, but trusting that the summer held in store great promise. The summer proved to be a watershed, an opening that changed the course of my life and set a tone and stage for much of what followed. That summer would become the first step on a journey that would take me far beyond the streets and landmarks of my old neighborhood to distant lands; different peoples, cultures, and traditions; and finally back home.

The summer at Williams College entailed scheduled time for academic studies, sports, and extracurricular activities; mandatory study halls; and an occasional social event. The academic rigor of the summer of '67 at Williams helped me to develop better study habits and a deeper sense of self-discipline, organization, and time management. I wanted to do well in the classroom and, by then, I was smitten with the game of basketball; I wanted to do well at that, too. In many ways, it was a terrific prelude to my prep school experience at Shattuck, but in other ways, it did not prepare me for what was to come.

What the summer of '67 could not foreshadow was the isolation and the trepidation that I would feel at times at Shattuck being the only person of color in my graduating class and only one of three people of color in the entire town. The radio broadcasts did not offer the music now popularly known as the "Motown sound" that I had become accustomed to as a youngster. Initially, I could not appreciate the excitement

that my schoolmates expressed over the music of groups with strange names such as Cream and Led Zeppelin. When they spoke of having a party, they meant eating finger food and drinking punch, dressed in jackets and ties while being chaperoned by faculty members. That wasn't anything like the parties back home, which featured what has popularly become known as "soul food," dimly lit party rooms, and Italian knit shirts worn under colorful shark-skin suits. That summer did not teach me how to deal with the occasional racist graffiti clandestinely written on textbooks or on the walls of the school buildings. There were times when I began to think that perhaps in moving to Faribault I had not really moved that far from Birmingham after all.

A turning point in that perspective came in the course of a conversation with my former headmaster, Burgess Ayres, a tall, handsome, Harvard-educated instructor. While telling him about my woes, he offered counsel that I will never forget: "Tony, you should learn to rise above the ignorance and naiveté in your own mind and in the minds of those who would stand in the way of your opportunities as a way to advance their own prejudices or to cover up their own shortcomings." Enlightenment arrived again! His words were inspirational and harkened me back to the lessons learned from my parents and my old neighborhood about hard work, playing by the rules, and seizing opportunities.

I don't recall the specific steps that I took to move forward or the specific academic achievements that followed, but that motivation propelled me through college, a post-college fellowship to study in Tanzania, a top-notch graduate school, and law school. My parents had been right all along, and so was Mr. Ayres.

The most memorable moment of the summer of '67 took place on July 23. A small group of us were hanging out in a dormitory common room when Eric Pookum, another Detroiter, burst into the room with a panic-stricken look on his face and announced that the city of Detroit had been destroyed by rioting, looting, and fires. A moment of hush fell across the room and all eyes turned directly to me, Eric, and Deolis Allen, the other member of our Detroit trio.

Without speaking, the three of us went directly to the nearest telephone bank located in the basement area near the vending machines. We stayed up late into the night calling our respective homes, but to no avail. The telephone lines stayed busy until the next morning, when we were finally able to reach our families and friends and learn that they were well.

What I will never forget about that evening apart from my concern for my family

and friends was a profound sadness and sense of despair for Detroit and everything about the city and my old neighborhood that was dear to me. That night, I planted a seed in my heart with hope that it would grow into a promise that I could deliver: to make the best of life's opportunities and one day go back home to do what I could to help provide opportunities for others. One way that I hope to deliver on that promise is through my service as president of the SBM; with this and upcoming President's Pages, I would like to ask your help in doing so.

In this column, I have shared with you highlights of my personal story to illustrate the importance of learning to step outside of the silos that we all so often become comfortable living in, embracing a larger and more diverse slice of life, and challenging ourselves and others to do likewise. This means no more than stepping outside of your personal comfort zone and learn-

ing to accept and respect people who differ from you—those who come from different backgrounds, experiences, cultures, and the like. I know that stepping outside of a silo can be a very challenging thing to do. But I know from personal experience that it is possible and that benefits can be realized by doing so. And I believe that as a profession, we will benefit if we work at it, treat it as fair play, and seize upon it as an opportunity.

To that end, I ask for your support for the SBM's Pledge to Achieve Diversity and Inclusion. You can find the pledge and accompanying commentary on the SBM website at <http://www.michbar.org/diversity>. By signing the pledge, you signify your commitment to an important principle that we lawyers have always championed: a level playing field for access, advancement, and success in our profession. Please take a moment to review the pledge and to sign it online. I am counting on your support. ■