

Director's Corner

INSPIRATION -- in Capital Letters

Visiting Historically Black Colleges

by Beth Hall

While keeping my ear on the speaker standing in front of the room, I scanned the auditorium, filled with cornrows and twists, braids and locks. I was probably the only white person in the room. Sitting toward the back and slightly to the side, I felt a growing sense of peace as I listened to one speaker after another exhorting the 300 youth and their respective families about the importance of a college education and why we should seriously consider the advantages of an HBCU (Historically Black College or University).

This past spring my son and I flew into Washington DC and wended our way through 5 states, ending in Atlanta. Over the course of a week, we looked at ten colleges and universities – all HBCUs. With each college visit, I watched my 17 year-old-son's excitement grow, he was literally gaining self-confidence and a new vision for his future. I guess I had some sense that this trip would be fun and interesting, and I thought it would probably include an educational aspect as well. But what I experienced was INSPIRATION in capital letters and yet another a lesson in why racial/ethnic/cultural immersion experiences really matter – especially for adopted children of color.

I have spent the last 20 years of my life talking to adoptive parents, children, and the adoption community about the importance of pride, connection and sense of history in one's legacy of birth as well as one's legacy of adoption. I found myself wishing there had been a way to take this trip with my son at the beginning of my journey through transracial adoption because it served as a great lesson in the value of racial/cultural immersion. And these are lessons that apply to all of our children of color, independent of their specific ethnicity.

So often the media, those of us that are white, and sometimes even members of the community itself, focus on struggles within the African American community (absent fathers, black-on-black violence or criminal justice/injustice etc.). It's as though we have developed a habit of looking at Black life in America through a "half empty glass." But there are so many ways that this same community is getting it right. And the historically Black Colleges and Universities represent an

immersion experience, begun immediately after the civil war that is Oh so right.

Many times those of us outside of any group judge 'other' communities based on their responses and relationships to us, or what the media represents to us, but isn't it more fair to look from within? Shouldn't we be asking what does the community do for their own children? How does it support it's own members? What does it offer to those who are trying to succeed and those who are succeeding? To those who show promise? How do members give back to a community after receiving that support? When it comes to creating connections and getting along in a diverse community, the idea of multiculturalism seems like the main goal, but to understand a culture we must not settle for multiculturalism, we must look at a community's full history, and the lessons it passes down from it's elders to it's youth.

Between my two children I have visited 25 or 30 colleges over the last several years. My daughter and I looked at mainstream colleges, many of which were diverse and situated in diverse locations, but nevertheless filled with more white students than any other population. We listened to admissions personnel extolling the accomplishments of their colleges and emphasizing how "lucky" students would be if they qualified to attend. Every lecture included statistics that always included intimidating enrollment criteria and foreboding numbers about applicants' chances of attendance. We heard from students who talked about their love and enthusiasm for their personal and academic life at their particular college and who shared with us their insider's view of the experience.

The difference between those trips and the one I took with my son was sharp. This HBCU trip was an education to me as a mom, a trainer of transracial families and a white woman who tries to be an ally for people of color and their communities, which continue to be oppressed. At these colleges I heard a call to community, to responsibility and an invitation to be treated as a treasure, not just a student — a treasure that the entire community values and depends on for its future. INSPIRATION in capital letters. We heard from successful business leaders – alumni - coming back to their alma mater to call on these potential students to take advantage of the

opportunity to attend college. We heard students telling the young men and women about the ways the city government or others in power (infer white culture here) may try to thwart student or college projects but how they banded together to overcome obstacles.

We heard from alumni officers who encouraged every student to apply, not to be discouraged or give up, no matter their grades, no matter their test scores, because they want students who want to learn, to grow. They want students to become leaders in the community. Positive and motivational messages were plentiful.

There were lengthy discussions of financial aid opportunities available to make this journey possible, a real contrast to the mainstream colleges, which always talk about financial aid availability but hold "special," information sessions for families in need, as if there is some shame or rarity in needing help to pay for a college education. The HBCU's financial aid and scholarship information is mainstream to their message, so there is no separation between the students; subsidization of a college education is seen as a demonstration of the value of each individual's education to the larger community rather than something that benefits them alone. This is a message I rarely heard except at the most elite mainstream institutions like Stanford or the Ivy's. And even then, there was a sense that the mission of their graduates was somehow earned by their personal intellect or vision rather than their membership in a greater community who is ready and willing to hold them up so they can accomplish great things personally which will in turn benefit everyone.

From the smallest college like Shaw University to larger schools like North Carolina State University, famous African Americans give concerts and teach classes, Black businesses partner to offer internships and jobs. Alumni remain active sources not only of funds but also encouragement to students in ways that just don't seem to exist in most mainstream schools. Visible pride is everywhere. At Hampton we stood on the spot where the Emancipation Proclamation was read for the first time by Benjamin Mays. (Honestly, I wanted to weep.) Moorehouse residences boasted about the dorm room where Martin Luther King, Jr. lived as a student. Many colleges have served as the film sets for movies like *Drumline* and *Stomp the Yard*, and all the schools have sororities and fraternities with 100-year-long traditions that are exciting and awe inspiring. Each tour included a history lesson that positioned that college's inception inside the Civil Rights Movement's fight for freedom and equality in a way that was powerful and meaningful to the potential students I watched tromp around the campus. For them, the sense of being part of something, of being invited to be special and be supported cannot be minimized.

Another striking difference was the curricula at the HBCU's, which were clearly designed for the whole student, not just in the rhetorical way that mainstream colleges use the term. Business classes require students to take golf and tennis, as testament to the need to learn to travel and excel not only academically but also with in social circles that may not have been open to them in the past. Job fairs abound and there is a direct link between getting this education and moving into the community with success and confidence. Even their promotion materials speak volumes:

Coming to Howard is about connecting – with the life of the mind, the heart of a tradition, and the soul of a people.

While the history of the college has been spectacular, Benedict's future will surpass its past. You are invited to be a part of this bright future. Apply to Benedict.

The [Moorehouse] Mystique is joining a brotherhood like none other. And after being ignored, stereotyped or marginalized, it's about finally finding that "home" that, deep inside, you always knew existed, where you are the heart, soul and hope of the community. And where you are not alone.

Contrast this with the rhetoric of mainstream colleges:

This "college of your choice" offers you a unique combination of a rigorous academic program, small size and a diverse student body. Our interdisciplinary, hands-on approach to the liberal arts challenges you to develop a wide range of skills; our close-knit community truly makes us what one college guide calls "an urban oasis." Our students have an impressive record of getting into top graduate programs.

When I read these contrasting promotions I hear the difference between institutions that are offering to hold up their students and give them the confidence of a history and a people, with a shared commitment to their success, versus, schools where students will be able to accomplish great things, if they have the skills and background to take advantage of what is being offered. In other words, at the mainstream schools the onus is on each individual student rather than being shared by a whole community, as is the case at the HBCUs.

Generally, as the only white person during these tours, I was ignored, treated with polite indifference or with a deference given to elders. And lest you worry for me, that was fine with me, because my son was easily welcomed with every right to assert his membership – encouraged and called out to succeed and join in. In fact, this lack of attention to me, gave both my son and I the opportunity to observe (in my case) and participate (in his case) as insiders, something that allowed for a much more honest experience of the culture of the schools than we would have gotten, had we been treated as somehow different because of our transracial status.

My son thrived during the trip and we both were filled with experiences that made this trip perhaps one of our best ever – maybe even more than our visit to Jamaica (or even Disneyland). We connected and solidified our own link in the context of this daily immersion. I am reminded of how much I have to learn and how ably members of my children's communities have combated adversity and found ways to create fountains of success that combat the tides of discrimination and injustice. Don't ever minimize the significance of connecting our children to a community that can hold them up and keep them safe. Whether my son attends an HBCU or not, we were both buoyed by the knowledge that these schools are out there and supporting "our" children and the community we both love and care so deeply about. In fact, I wonder if this immersion in history and sense of community, is more important for adoptees because of the loss they have already had to survive of their own personal and communal history.

Reach out to create links for your children to experience this kind of nurturing and membership within their ethnic and/or racial cultural community. And prepare to be INSPIRED, in capital letters.