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Diversity is Critical: An Interview with Dr. Mildred Dalton Henry

Abstract

Many might say that that diversity in education has been achieved. In an interview, Dr. Mildred Henry discusses that challenges that she faced in becoming a counselor educator in higher education and suggests that more work in the area of diversity is needed. She comments on how she struggled to overcome obstacles and kept faith with her heart to have an impact on the community in San Bernardino. As a result, Dr. Henry developed the Pal Center. She then invited students in her multicultural and fieldwork classes to work with the Pal Center. In this way, she provided needed hands-on experience with the diverse population of San Bernardino in order to build multicultural competency among future counselors.

Keywords

diversity, multiculturalism, multicultural competency, counseling, counselor education

Author Statement

Dr. Daniel Stewart is a lecturer in counselor education at California State University, San Bernardino.

Diversity is Critical: An Interview with Dr. Mildred Dalton Henry Daniel Stewart

Dr. Mildred Dalton Henry is a Professor Emeritus of California State University, San Bernardino's counseling and guidance masters degree program where she taught courses and supervised practica and fieldwork while infusing diversity training and cultural competency in all that she did. Dr. Henry was the first African-American to become a tenured professor in the College of Education. Seeing the needs in San Bernardino and having the conviction to do something about it, she developed the PAL Center (Provisional Accelerated Learning Center) in the heart of San Bernardino's Muscoy area, where disadvantaged youth and the community at large could receive much needed educational and counseling support. This also became a training ground for her graduate students. In 2012, a new elementary school in San Bernardino was named after her, Dr. Mildred Dalton Henry Elementary School, in recognition of her work in the community and advocacy for underprivileged. The interview took place on December 6, 2015, in Hesperia, CA

Simply won't give in

Daniel: Could you tell me little bit about your educational background, and your work history and background?

Mildred: I attended a historically black college in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I went to high school at Merrill High in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and at that time we had no classroom books and we were completely segregated. I had some books from across town, they were torn and tattered and used in the white schools, and that's the education and resources that I had access to. However, I had teachers that were very dedicated professionals and were determined that we learned, and told us that, no matter how tattered the books were, be sure we knew the material on the pages, and that was the high school setting. Well I had

an affliction, a physical affliction with my feet, so I cannot walk in the summer and my feet broke down with blisters and I had to crawl on the floor and use a wheelchair. My parents, in an effort to try to and find a treatment for me, took me to St. Louis to Homer G. Phillips Hospital, which was an all-black training school for medical personnel. I had already tried and exhausted Arkansas's resources, so I went to St. Louis and they were able to provide some assistance. I ended up graduating and staying in St. Louis, because I was traveling every two weeks from Arkansas to Missouri and my parents decided that I would stay there with my uncle and aunt, while I went to the hospital for treatment every two weeks during the year. So I ended up enrolling in Washington Technical High School and graduated there. I went back to Arkansas, because we had learned how to control the disease by then and enrolled in college at Arkansas A & M College.

I completed two years of A & M and then I got married and went to Minnesota. I was going to go to the University of Minnesota but instead I started to raise a family. So, I was a college drop-out. It was eighteen years later that I returned to college at A & M with four children to support by then. I was divorced, but I went back to school and all four of my children were in school and they graduated from high school. Then we all went to college, and all of my children are college graduates and they all have masters degrees. I finished my masters degree and went on to finish my doctorate. My masters degree is from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, and I obtained my PhD from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Each time I went to school I was told I was too old, "You'll never get a job," but every time I got a job.

When I finished my PhD, Dean Garcia from California State University, San

Bernardino came to Lambert Airport in St. Louis to interview me. Incidentally, I had sent in my photograph with my afro, because I didn't want anyone to bother me, if they could not deal with an assertive black woman. So when I applied I sent in my photograph and Dean Garcia came out to St. Louis to interview me for this position at California State San Bernardino. An interesting side note was that the deadline had already passed for applications at Cal State but I decided to send it in anyway and apply. He came to St. Louis and hired me on the spot. The first question I asked of him was, "What is the climate for African-Americans in San Bernardino and on that campus?" and he showed me a picture of a professor in [another] department, to show me they had diversity on the campus. However, when I came, she was gone. She didn't get tenured. That I found has been a continuous dilemma for the campus the entire time that I was there for fifteen years, the lack of diversity and what I would think was equitable treatment. This is my educational background and this is why I have been so interested in cultures and diversity, because I came from a culture that told me I could not, and I had to succeed in a culture that didn't know that I could.

Contributing to a better world

Daniel: Is there a particular field of knowledge that you have endeavored most to contribute to during your career, and are there any personal experiences behind your story?

Mildred: I have been most interested in multicultural issues, and felt I could contribute to that field of knowledge due to my personal experiences. As an African-American (previously identified as Black and Negro) growing up in a segregated South, having experienced inequitable and humiliating treatment, and seeing African-American adults abused, simply because of the color of their skin, I felt that educating others in multicultural issues would be my best contribution. I witnessed my parents'

cotton gin, general store, and farm torched and burned to the ground three times, because of racial hatred. My parents only wanted to experience that so-called American dream. My personal experiences have driven my research and I have shared these ideas and experiences in hopes of creating better cultural understanding and environments.

Daniel: What in your education or career has given you the most satisfaction?

Mildred: The most satisfaction has been derived from helping the lesser-advantaged individuals overcome barriers in their pathway to success. It is rewarding to see their joy at their achievements.

Daniel: What larger causes do you see yourself contributing to?

Mildred: I see myself contributing to a better world of understanding and acceptance.

Daniel: Are there any unfulfilled ambitions to pursue?

Mildred: As I view today's hatred toward one's fellow citizen, my work is not finished and my ambitions are still unfulfilled. My research work will continue.

Daniel: What ethical and professional attitudes are most important to you?

Mildred: The California unprofessional attitude toward professional individuals has been most surprising. In previous environments, professionals were addressed with titles, and they personally dressed as professionals. I found just the opposite in my California environments. Professionals should dress and behave as professional role models.

Daniel: What in your career has been the most pressing challenge for you?

Mildred: A challenge has been to take a stand when observing unethical practices, without being too abrasive. In my immediate culture I was always taught to take a stand for the right. Upon arrival at CSUSB, I was advised to remain on the campus and teach and research. My work in the community was not valued. Consequently, I had to make a decision based on my ethical belief in contrast to advice from some educators. Following a determined,

successful battle to have my community work accepted as "professional growth" I was promoted to full professor. Although I was not seeking rewards, apparently members of the community appreciated my endeavors and the San Bernardino City Unified School District Board of Education named a new school the Dr. Mildred Dalton Henry Elementary school in honor of my contributions.

Daniel: What dispositions would you suggest that students entering the field of education would be best-advised to cultivate?

Mildred: Students entering the field of education should have a love for people, lots of patience, be open-minded, be willing to learn, and to take the road less traveled.

Daniel: What stands out for you most about teaching at California State University San Bernardino? How does it differ from other universities you have worked in?

Mildred: I loved the serene, beautiful physical setting of the campus, nestled at the foot of the mountains. I was surprised at the laid-back relationship between student and professor. In graduate school, although students were adults, I expected to be addressed with a title. I earned my Ph.D. and expected to be addressed as Dr. Henry. I required the same of my students when teaching as an adjunct professor for Southern Illinois University, at the San Diego Naval Station and at March Air Force Base in Riverside.

Daniel: How has the Inland Empire and California State University San Bernardino shaped how you teach and counsel?

Mildred: When I came to Cal State San Bernardino, it was an experience that I had to reckon with, because I have been culturally taught differently. In order to survive in this environment, I had to learn to write about myself which was totally different from my culture. We are talking about culture again! I was told you never promote yourself or talk about yourself, but when I came to Cal State in order to remain a faculty member there and to go through these faculty activities reports, I

had to get a "thank you" letter from everybody for everything that I did, I had to get a letter to document what I did in the community. That was not why I did things, to have people "thank me" for them. So I had to learn this for myself and be able to impart that to my students, the importance of survival, of documenting what you do. As far as teaching, I wanted to be sure that the students who were going into counseling, like I said, had experience, hands-on experience. So I set up a community-based organization called the PAL Center (Provisional Accelerated Learning Center) where students could then go out and volunteer, teach, tutor and work with people in the community, because this is where they come from, the community to the hill, to Cal State and we cannot be effective with them, if we do not know where they come from and what their experiences are. This was one benefits of opening up the PAL Center, not only did it provide help for people in the community, but it provided a "laboratory", if you will, for Cal State students to come out and see that this is the real world. In fact, I had a fieldwork student at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in San Bernardino and he was having difficulty. When I went over there, he told me that if it had not been for my cultural class he would not have survived at that school, because he lived up in Arrowhead or somewhere in the mountains and that he had to make that adjustment, from the "hill to the valley", from his all-white environment to this black environment at that time.

This did affect my teaching and what I felt the students needed to know. That's why I love the multicultural class and it needs to be taught by people who know what they are doing. You cannot take a white person from all-white environment and have them teach how to work with people in all black environment. They have no relativity, they have to relate to the population they are going to work with. I'm very much into making sure that people that are going to work in various communities know something about

the community and about the people that they are going to be working with, otherwise they hurt rather than help.

I felt the need to bring California State University from “the hill” to the valley where the people live. I wanted people on the campus - professors, staff, and students - to work in the community and experience what our clients are exposed to on a daily basis. Hence, the PAL Center was offered as an elective place to fulfill field work requirements. Those students who availed themselves of this opportunity were amazed at the impact they could have in a different cultural environment.

Unyielding commitment

Daniel: How do you personally think about diversity in counselor education?

Mildred: I think diversity is critical and one reason I went into counseling is that I know, because of my personal experiences and background, that all people are not alike, all behaviors are not alike and in order to effectively counsel someone in working with them we need to know something about their culture and about their background. So I want to be sure that people that were training to be counselors and would be going out into the community and out into the schools were aware of these cultural differences and how they impact behavior, so they would not go out and destroy and hurt people, rather than help them. So I think diversity is critical. It has to be. All theories do not apply to all cultures and to all populations and I feel that it is critical to be effective.

Daniel: How would you characterize your personal efforts to contribute to a more socially just world?

Mildred: We live in a diverse society. Consequently everyone should be aware and react accordingly. Having lived in inequitable and unjust environments, I have always provided social and educational assistance to the more oppressed populations. Hence, my personal efforts led to the establishment of

agencies that provided community-based education, employment, and social assistance. In San Bernardino, that organization was Provisional Educational Services, Inc., which operates the Provisional Accelerated Learning (PAL) Center. The community-based PAL Center has been in continuous operation since 1985. Within seven minutes of the CSUSB campus, it has provided a culturally diverse site for diversity experiences for the training of CSUSB students. The PAL Center and PAL Charter Academy High School operate a WASC accredited high school, with A-G requirements; and youth employment training and job placement.

Daniel: What have been your most important learnings about cultural diversity?

Mildred: People of all cultures have high and lower achievers. Most of the time the lower achievers are at that level due to lack of opportunity. To see the lesser-advantaged students cross the PAL Center stage receiving high school diplomas to the cheering and adulation of their families has been most rewarding. Additionally, to have prepared and trained youth for employment, and see them become self-supporting has been of immeasurable satisfaction. It is most difficult to respect insensitivity and insensitive practices due to ignorance when one can so easily become sensitized, if not open-minded. It has been surprising to see that the more things change, the more they remain the same. I was employed at CSUSB thirty-two years ago, however, the scarcity of African-Americans in tenure-track positions, and promoted through tenure-track positions, continues to amaze me.

Daniel: How do you go about reflecting on experience? How have you tried to foster practices of self-reflection among your California State University San Bernardino students?

Mildred: I have been a reflective practitioner because of my personal experiences, observations, and determination to make a difference in my sphere of influence. I am using my reflections to secure funding and

support for lesser advantaged populations. Students enrolled in my multicultural counseling classes were made well aware of my self-reflections and requests for them to do likewise. They were asked to put those discoveries into practice. Education is no good unless shared.

Concluding thoughts

As a counselor educator and counseling practitioner, I find value in the commitment to service those who are underprivileged, diverse and often lack access to qualified counselors who are culturally sensitive. Dr. Henry's interview illustrates the continued need to be vigilant in supporting efforts for social justice and equity in higher education, as well as in the field. There is an ever-growing need for culturally sensitive counselors that are not only taught the technical aspects of working with people from diverse backgrounds, but also embodies the spirit of multiculturalism. Often, the discussion of discrimination and racism is countered with arguments that do not acknowledge the strength, motivation and determination to carry on in spite of such obstacles. Sometimes this means making bold statements and taking a stand. Other times, it may mean teaching and creating opportunities where justice grows. Because diversity is multithreaded and takes various forms, I believe that beginning with respect is the single most important step in developing rapport with diverse populations.