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Office of University Communications

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# "Holding on to a Dream"—GWU Professor Reflects on Diversity and MLK, Jr.

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Office of University Communications

January 24, 2013

By: Dr. Dianne Sykes, Gardner-Webb University

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."—Martin Luther King, Jr.

I grew up in a town near Seattle; a small white town, attended a virtually all-white school and lived in a small house with my father and sister. My mom had died when I was six. I learned about the Civil Rights Movement and leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. by accident when I was looking at magazines in the school library for an assignment. It all seemed so fundamentally wrong—to hate people just because of the color of their skin. There was no one to talk to about all this; my father had a name for every group of people, and he used those names frequently. My teachers said such conversations could be offensive—political correctness hit my school early.

So I looked elsewhere. I would skip school and go to Seattle where I met people from around the world. I found them so interesting and so open to telling me about their lives. It became more difficult to hear the jokes and cruel remarks that were so much a part of my life at home. At the age of 17, I left. I joined a small carnival that was passing through town and spent the next several years traveling the United States. I mention all this, to take you to the time I learned about the reality of color—not the statistics, books, or news articles, but the moment I learned for myself the meaning of Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality."

We were at the State Fair in Birmingham, Ala. It was my first time in the South. I struggled to understand that confusing southern drawl, the slow pace, and most of all, being surrounded by people who were a different color than me. I felt misunderstood, and foreign to this environment. I lay awake one night, wondering, "Am I prejudiced?" I hated where I was and felt so insecure and afraid. It was so much easier to passively disapprove of racism in my former all white world. Tired, I went to work the next day early, for it was Kid's Day, and the fairgrounds were filling up quickly.

Minutes after I opened my concession, a little boy stood in front of me. His face was filled with the remnants of a just completed cotton candy, and his dark eyes were as big as saucers. He looked at all the prizes and his eyes fixed upon a stuffed tiger. "Ma'am, ma'am, what do I gotta do to win that tiger?" As I told him how to play, it struck me. In every location, in every state on every fairground, that face—the face of a child dreaming of winning his desired

prize, was always the same. That look that held a dream of competing for and winning a treasure was not based on skin color but lived in the heart of each child I met. I learned that day that people are people and each of us begin as small children, wide-eyed, filled with dreams, and believing that dreams can, indeed, come true.

Martin Luther King, Jr. hoped for a day that children of all colors could walk together; that we would be judged by the content of our character rather than the color of our skin. I could stop here and recite the statistics that demonstrate so clearly and sadly that will still have far to go. I could point out that even though our children hold hands and play with their friends of all colors, they continue to grow up in a separated world. I could point out that we continue to track discrimination in housing, employment, schooling, our criminal justice system and so on. Of these things we know, and of these things we must strive to do better.

I tell my students that in spite of where I started, I finished three degrees, and raised two fine sons. And perhaps it was because of what I learned in my travels that I believe that to change those statistics we must stop leaving behind our ability to play and laugh together as children and instead become adults who desire to work and live together as one. We may not win a tiger, but we will win something so much better; the joy of finding ourselves in each other.

*Dr. Dianne Sykes is associate professor of sociology at Gardner-Webb University. Her research has focused on a variety of areas, including multicultural education, rural telecommunications for hospitals, advertising in the food industry, and child development through television programming. An active faculty advisor, student-centered professor, and member of the American Sociological Association, she teaches courses on Juvenile Delinquency, Minority Groups, and Social Services.*