CAROL MCCART BRENNAN, BS, MA, PHD
MY STORY
by Carol McCart Brennan

My name is Carol McCart Brennan, and this is my story, or at least some of the bits and pieces which influenced my values of social justice and equality! Those influences began during my youth and are many and varied. Certainly they include my interactions with significant people- teachers, professors, family members, friends and colleagues. I have chosen here to recount a few experiences, only, which had profound effects on my values. I apologize to the many people left out!

I moved to Marshfield in 1991 to assume the position of Dean and CEO of what was then the University of Wisconsin Marshfield/Wood County Campus. My story begins in 1943 when I was born in Ottumwa, Iowa, a community of approximately 30,000 residents at the time, to middle-class parents. Fear not, you shall not be subjected to a recounting of my 77 years! In fact, I will first tell a story that happened when I was a junior in high school, as I believe it was an experience that awakened in me an awareness of inequality and discrimination. As a young woman in a small city, I had not encountered such and was fortunate to have parents who did not demonstrate either.

During my second year of high school Spanish, a few fellow students and I started a Spanish Club. Our teacher told us that there was a group of young women from Venezuela who were studying that year at a local junior college and so we were excited to meet and talk with them and decided to host them for an afternoon tea. During that event, I sat talking with three of the women and asked them about their experiences in Ottumwa. I listened speechless (an unusual state for me even in those early years!) as they described various incidents of being treated unwelcomingly, such as being stared at and followed around a dress shop by a clerk who did not speak to them or offer assistance. I was amazed that anyone could treat these charming, beautiful and intelligent young women with anything less than kindness and was nearly in tears as I listened as they told of other such encounters.

Now in this day, who among us would be at all surprised at their experience? But for me, it was my first realization that fellow townspeople would not feel pleased to meet and learn about these women, as was I. We discussed the incident in our Spanish class and fortunately had a teacher who was willing and able to inform us about the discomfort of many people while in the company of others unlike themselves, and that while those in our class were primarily supportive of diversity, we could expect to encounter a population of those who were not. I doubt in retrospect that I was totally unaware that such was the case, because as an avid reader in my youth, I had recently read such literature as the play "Raisin in the Sun" and the book "To Kill a Mockingbird". But this was the earliest first-hand experience I can recall, and one that had a lasting impact on my values and future.


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My years in undergraduate school deepened my awareness of unfair and unjust treatment especially for people of color and women. I joined the International Club and learned a great deal from various foreign students, including a fellow who became my first fiancé. And I had a profound experience as a sorority president who nominated a black woman for membership in the sorority. The young woman was a daughter of two physicians (one a psychiatrist) in New York City. She was smart, talented and lovely. And in my innocence, or naivety, I thought she would be an excellent member. Of course I was aware that there were no other black women in our sorority, but I assumed that was only because such a qualified person had not yet applied. It did not occur to me that she would be found unacceptable solely because of her race. Within a week, the head of the National Sorority flew to our campus and demanded to know what I was trying to prove and ordered me to immediately withdraw the nomination. In response, I resigned from my position and from the sorority as I refused to make the withdrawal. The naivety of a small-town girl raised in the 50s ended abruptly and I developed an awareness that would continue to shape my values and beliefs throughout my life.

Following my undergraduate education, I taught social studies in a St. Louis suburban high school for four years. My goals in the classroom were to instill in my students the ability for critical thinking and an awareness of social issues such as racism, the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty and the lives of those in our country that were less fortunate. I encouraged my students to question what

they were being taught and to learn how to find reliable information (research). Those years made it obvious to me that high school was not where I should be teaching. Of course, it was likely the attitude of the administration, as well! I'm sure had they discovered that I was running off copies of the students' underground newspaper, "The Weed", in the teachers' lounge after hours, they would have suggested as much!

As I began my graduate work in sociology, I continued to read the literature available on the subjects of social injustice and inequality, and became involved in both the women's and civil rights movements. With fellow students, I worked with the Black Egyptians of East St. Louis (the local version of the Black Panthers) and a group of Catholic nuns on projects to support young black children, create community support systems and to organize protests and demonstrations. Those experiences were very enlightening, indeed. The issues with which the Black Egyptians were dealing and the strength of the nuns who often defied male authority and hierarchy taught amazing lessons.

Also, during my Master's studies I engaged in a research project comparing the District Attorney's and the Public Defender's Offices in the city of St. Louis. That experience demonstrated dramatically the inequality of policing and defense for Black men and women. The resources and funding provided to the District Attorney's Office, including staffing with a talented crew of attorneys and investigators on loan from the Police Department, far exceeded that available for the Public Defender's Office, where the budget allowed for fewer attorneys and no investigators. The attorneys needed to do their own investigations and each had an overwhelming case load. During my research, I often attended court hearings and trials and witnessed first-hand the unequal and unfair treatment of people of color, and the inability of the PD to provide adequate defenses. Such was the systemic racism employed routinely in St. Louis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And my research experience further educated me to it.

My academic field of sociology also led me to continue the study of the literature on women's issues and inequality and when I became a university faculty member at a St. Louis college, I began adding classes such as "Sex Roles and the Socialization Process" to my teaching load, and eventually assumed the administration of a program in Women's Studies which I grew into a master's level degree program. In addition, I worked in the campus admissions office to extend the recruitment of the university in inner-city schools. I also worked with another suburban school district (Ferguson-Florissant) to establish a safe place and support center for black students being bused into the white district. Working with those amazing students and in that situation was an experience which taught me many addition lessons, as did my good fortune to have a diverse group of friends and colleagues during those years.

As my administrative career continued, I stressed the development of programs that were accessible to students of color and adult women wishing to reenter college. While dean and acting Vice President of a small college in suburban Chicago, we initiated such opportunities as weekend and evening degree programs and the establishment of credit for life experiences. One of my joys was handing out graduation diplomas to women I had encouraged to reenter college, often after their doing so with many demands and challenges in their lives. I expect that I share that pleasure with many faculty members who have worked with adult reentry students.

As the Dean of the UW-Marshfield/Wood County, I also was pleased to participate in the hiring of women and diverse faculty and staff members and to watch their careers develop. One of the many reasons why I accepted that position was the tradition of the University of Wisconsin to provide opportunities for accessible higher education. And the UW Colleges were excellent examples of institutions which welcomed returning adult students, place-bound students and students who could not afford or qualify for admission to a larger university. I hold a strong value for public education as I was fortunate to progress through higher education because of quality public universities. My family, and later I, could not have afforded for me to attend private institutions. So I was pleased to join such a campus. I admit that another attraction to the University of Wisconsin was that at the time I was hired, the President of the system, the Chancellor of the flagship campus, and six of the twelve UW College Deans were all women!

The developments of this past year (2020)) have made it apparent that our society continues to suffer from the same issues of social justice- inequality, poverty, discrimination, systemic racism and sexism- of which I first became aware in the 1950s and 60s. Yes, there have been improvements, but the struggles are far from over. May we all accept the challenge to keep up the good fight.