



Forty-six
years ago –



Tracing the Roots of Social Justice: Reflections on Equity in Education

By Jennifer Proe | Photographed by Jason Miller except where noted

in 1970 – the Shaker Schools embarked on an ambitious journey toward greater equity in public education.

A group of committed administrators, teachers, and parents – people of different races, backgrounds, and experiences – came together to create a voluntary integration program known as the Shaker Schools Plan.

At a time when public school districts across the nation were struggling with forced integration through busing, the community of Shaker Heights led the region – and indeed the nation – in providing an example of a peaceful, voluntary effort to help right the racial imbalance that existed in our schools.

Shaker’s effort took place against a tumultuous backdrop. Only 16 years earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional.

When Medgar Evers tried to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1963, he was murdered. That same year, Alabama Governor George Wallace blocked the doorway of a University of Alabama admissions office to prevent two black students from entering.

In Cleveland, the NAACP filed suit in 1973 alleging the city school district had created and maintained a deliberately segregated system, a case that would last for 25 years.

Today, the concept of equity in education has come to encompass more than racial balance. We now strive to provide an inclusive, equitable experience for all students regardless of their race, religion, culture, socioeconomic status, ability, and sexual or gender identity.

In Shaker Heights Schools, those efforts are nothing new, but rather the continuation of a long arc of social progress.

Paula Hooper, SHHS ’79, whose family participated in the Shaker Schools Plan by sending their students from Moreland to Malvern, sums it up this way:

“My experiences at Shaker helped me to realize that there’s a difference between equality and equity in education. Equality means everyone gets the same thing. Equity means that everyone gets what they need to become successful.”

Here, seven people share their experiences in the Shaker Schools over the past several decades, as they relate to equity in education and social justice.

Their reflections demonstrate both how far we have come and what work must still be done.

A Moral Obligation

Dr. John H. (Jack) Lawson
was superintendent of the Shaker schools from 1965–1976. Here, he recalls the landmark voluntary racial integration program in the Shaker Schools, known as the Shaker Schools Plan, which began during his tenure. His children, John, Paula, and Jay Peter, all graduated from the Shaker Schools. Lawson later went on to become the Massachusetts commissioner of education and vice president at the University of New Hampshire. He is now retired and lives in Florida.

“A school district has the moral obligation to provide the best possible education for all students. We weren’t providing the best education for some of our minority students because they were isolated.”

One of the reasons I was interested in moving to Shaker Heights was that I wanted my children to have the opportunity to get to know students of all races, all religions, all ethnic groups, all political groups, all economic groups. That’s the way it should be in a democracy.

When I arrived in 1965, about 16 percent of our students were African American, and during my time there that increased to about 36 percent. However, Moreland Elementary School reached a point where about 98 percent of their students were African American. When we reviewed the test results as we did every year, I noted that our Moreland students were at the bottom. (Moreland was repurposed as the Shaker Heights Public Library after several elementary schools were closed in the late 1980s.)

It was my perception then, and it always has been, that a school district has the moral obligation to provide the best possible education for all students. We weren’t providing the best education for some of our minority

students because they were isolated. The research at that time was very clear: If you isolate a group of any type of individuals from the mainstream then they aren’t going to have the same kind of opportunity. I thought it would be wrong to just continue doing what we were doing, which is why we decided to make a change.

We had an informational meeting about voluntary integration at the High School, filling the auditorium. Bob Rawson was the head of the school board at this time, and after he introduced me at the meeting, a number of people booed, and they went on for a while until they finally quieted down. We answered all their questions until 11 pm that night.

The major objection people had was that they thought their property values would go down. Also some of the people thought it was going to be costly because of the extra busing, but we were able to get a grant from the Ford Foundation to cover those expenses.



October 25, 1966: (from left) Tony Ridenour, Leonard Bates, Robin Forte, Dr. John H. Lawson, Isabel Rosenfeld. Photo by Bill Nehez; Courtesy of the Shaker Heights Public Library Local History Collection

We held a number of meetings at the elementary schools, and some people were for it and some disagreed. I think I received about 200 or so letters from residents who were against trying to integrate the schools, and there were a lot of telephone calls. On the other hand, we had great support from the PTA committees and the various church leaders and community associations.

In the meantime, a group of citizens who were interested in integration sent me a petition saying that they would be willing to volunteer their children to attend Moreland School, so we built that into the Shaker Plan. We then had several African-American families volunteer to send their students to the other elementary schools. That gave us a better racial balance at each school.

The first day of school when we implemented the Shaker Plan [in the fall of 1970], we had an administrator from central office on each one of the buses to make sure everything went smoothly. One of the major networks came

and took pictures of what was going on and they ran it on the television that night. After that, I didn't get any more telephone calls and we didn't have a single problem.

After we integrated the elementary schools, we did the same for the two junior highs. When we looked at test scores in the following years, the achievement of black students had increased significantly, and there was almost no difference between white and black students' scores.

A few years after we integrated, a study of the property values for all of the communities in Cuyahoga County came out, and despite what people were worried would happen, the properties in Shaker Heights appreciated higher than in all the other communities.

A number of residents later told me, "Initially, we really didn't favor what you were doing, Jack, but now we support it because our children are doing well and they are happy. They've met students they otherwise never would have met."



Facing the Challenges of Integration



(top) Paula Hooper,
Photo by Amy Snyder/Exploratorium;
(bottom) Emily Hooper Lansana,
Photo courtesy University
of Chicago

“Even in a liberal community like Shaker, we can’t assume that there are not the realities of cultural inequity and insensitivity that need to be addressed.”

In the 1970s, Earline and Lorenzo Hooper volunteered to bus their daughters, Paula and Emily, from the Moreland neighborhood to Malvern. (Older brother Sam Hooper, SHHS '75, attended Moreland.) Lorenzo served on the citizens' committee that helped form the Shaker Schools Plan. Paula, who taught at Fernway Elementary from 1985-88, now works as a science educator, most recently for the Exploratorium in San Francisco. Emily is the associate director of community arts and engagement for the Levin Center of the Arts at the University of Chicago. Both reflect on their experiences here.

Paula Hooper, SHHS '79:

There were about 30 African-American kids who got on the bus to go to Malvern every day. I remember it was a big deal going to lunch at a white friend's house across the street from the school.

There were things that happened in school that made me realize something was different. I was in the middle group for math, and I really wanted to be in the higher group. I remember asking my teacher what I could do to move up, and her response was, “You don’t need to move up – you’re fine where you are.” There was a feeling there that I just didn’t understand.

At the High School, I remember being one of only three African-American kids in an upper level class where the teacher treated us horribly. But my English teacher, Mr. Vargo, was incredibly supportive – he made me feel like I was really smart.

My trajectory was impacted by the integration at Shaker in both positive and negative ways. Learning how to deal with all types of people was a positive. On the other hand, there was a subtle kind of racism that I felt was constraining the experience that African-American kids had at Shaker.



Emily Hooper Lansana, SHHS '84:



In elementary school, I didn’t spend a lot of time thinking about white friends or black friends, we were just friends. In junior high, the social landscape changed. Racial lines were drawn and you had to be careful about crossing them. At the High School, it was pretty much the same. The black kids sat on one side of the cafeteria and the white kids sat on the other side.

I had a diverse group of friends, and we wanted to support other students in having diverse friendships. We started what was called the Student Group on Race Relations (SGORR), and the focus of our work was to have High School students go into the elementary schools and talk to kids about friendship and peer pressures and the fact that it should be okay to cross lines to make friends, to be who you wanted to be.

I think the important thing about the way it happened was that the idea came from a group of students, and we received the administrative support that we needed in order to activate the program. I think there are a lot of other places where, if a student came up with this idea, they wouldn’t have had the support to make it happen.

As an African-American female student I experienced the opportunity to have access to a wonderful education, and when I am looking at the teachers my children have, I often compare them to the amazing teachers I had when I was growing up. As someone who works in the realm of arts education, those early influences were really important to me.

On the other hand, I was often one of only a handful of African-American students in upper level courses, despite the fact that our school was about equally divided between white and black students.

Even in a liberal community like Shaker, we can’t assume that there are not the realities of cultural inequity and insensitivity that need to be addressed, and can be addressed more directly and more consciously.

I think that because I grew up in an environment where we were aware of cultural challenges and experienced inequity that I have been committed to social justice. I have stayed in touch with many of my friends that I grew up with, and many of them have also remained committed to social justice in the work that they do and the way they live their lives.

Leveling the Playing Field

Daniel Kilroy, a senior at Shaker Heights High School, has attended the Shaker schools since Pre-K, where he attended Shaker's Early Intervention Program. Here, he explains how a visual impairment known as Duane's Syndrome affects his educational needs.



I have a paralyzed cranial nerve that prevents me from correctly moving my eyes. They stay fixed in front, so when I'm trying to read or watch something that moves, I can't lock onto it and track it. I can't read down the page without stress, so my eyes get fatigued.

It doesn't prevent me from doing anything, it just makes it more difficult. I played football in fifth grade as a lineman, but I couldn't keep track of the ball or who was around me, so I wasn't as effective as I could be. I switched to wrestling, which I have done for four years, because it's a more one-on-one sport, and I've also done track and field.

For all of my school career, I've had guidance and someone to talk to if I need help with my visual impairment. I have a Teacher for the Visually Impaired (TVI) who comes to school and helps me try different things to help me out.

I was only ever treated differently at school when I received the necessary accommodations, like extra time for tests, larger print, and a scribe who writes down my answers onto a Scantron sheet.

Because of these accommodations, sometimes I felt like I was taking the easy way out, or cheating

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in some way. This is all I've ever known, so it's not like I have something to compare it to. This is normal for me. My TVI and intervention specialists at Shaker helped me to understand that I really don't have the same visual prowess as other students, so I do deserve the help I am getting, and that I should speak up if I need something.

I recently started sending out emails to my teachers to let them know about my needs, and that I might need extra time on assignments or to step out of the classroom to rest my eyes. I also go to the Intervention Lab every day for 10th period so I can catch up on assignments and get organized.

At Shaker, I learned perseverance, advocating for myself, resourcefulness, and overall study habits. Science and English are my best subjects. History is also one of my favorite subjects, but it was really hard for me because it's such a reading-heavy class, and I still struggle with note-taking.

Next year I plan to study geology in college. I'm not really worried about academics, more just the personal responsibility part. I know there will be similar disability services in place at college.

I just earned my Eagle Scout award by replacing and extending a guideline along the trail to a new cabin at the Cleveland Sight Center's Camp Highbrook. I have been a client at the Sight Center for most of my life. If I find other opportunities to work with the visually impaired, I think I would probably like to do that.

Learning a Respect for Diversity

Ifeolu Claytor, SHHS '12, is a junior at Miami University of Ohio, where he is pursuing a double major in political science and social justice studies. He intends to go to law school. His grandfather, J. Howard Battle, is a realtor who helped to integrate the Ludlow community of Shaker Heights and was the first minority member of the Cleveland Board of Realtors. His aunt, Ellen Battle, is a teacher at Fernway Elementary.

At Shaker, I had a lot of communities that supported me as a student. I was a group leader in SGORR (Student Group on Race Relations), I was a student government class representative, I did the morning announcements, I was a MAC (Minority Achievement) Scholar, and I was a member of GSA (Gay Straight Alliance). I was also a field commander with the marching band and played lacrosse.

I think GSA is really integral to Shaker. It's extremely important to have a gay straight alliance because it allows people the open space to be who they are, especially if they don't feel comfortable being "out" with the entire school population. It serves as a support group, but also an education group, so that people can feel comfortable stepping

"SGORR was extremely valuable because it taught me to sit back and listen and really take in other people's opinions before forming my own."



out and speaking up when they hear something that is incorrect, whether or not they identify as a member of the LGBT community.

SGORR was extremely valuable because it taught me to sit back and listen and really take in other people's opinions before forming my own.

That was something I brought with me to Miami, just waiting and listening sometimes before I jump into things.

With MAC Scholars, it was a different form of diversity. A lot of



Photo by Jeff Sabo, Miami University

people would think that high school-age African-American men are all the same, which couldn't be further from the truth. Some of us played multiple sports, some didn't play any sports. There are different levels of academic interests and club interests. It made me more sensitive to the idea that everybody is a person before they just fit into one box or group.

My social justice experience and my activities with different student groups at Shaker really pushed me to

find that community at Miami. I found it in my political science major and in student government, where I serve as the secretary for diversity affairs. I loved my intro class on social justice so much that I made it my second major.

My Shaker experience was extremely influential in that decision, because it pushed me to find thinkers, people who want to discuss those issues, and not necessarily agree on them, but to discuss things in an educated way and respect others while doing so.

Working Together to Create Change

Deanna Clemente Milne

joined the Shaker Schools in 2005, after working in the Warrensville Heights City School District. In 2012, she joined forces with her fellow Woodbury art teacher Robert Bognar and a host of volunteers to launch a program that pairs art with social justice, called Woodbury Creating Change. Every two years, the students craft and paint ceramic items and sell them to benefit local and international charities. (This year, the students are selling colorful tapas plates at the school on April 28 from 6-8 pm.)

“The International Baccalaureate philosophy is such a gift for this project, it just fits like a glove.”



often think, “What do I want students to have with them forever when they leave the art room at Woodbury?” Of course I want them to understand color theory and the elements of art. But in the end, I think it’s all about how to have our students think creatively and artistically about solving the world’s problems. How can they be more empathetic? I think so much of the hate that exists in the world is due to lack of empathy.

Woodbury Creating Change really centers around that idea: How do we get them to think about using art to solve a problem they see in their community or in the world?

The inquiry statement is “Through collaboration, a community can create change.” That connects perfectly with working together to try to make a difference.

The two projects we made in the past were soup bowls and mugs, and we had dozens of local restaurants that donated their food and their time to be a part of the event. The proceeds have benefited local charities, like the Shaker Hunger Center, and international charities, like Isaac’s Wells, which provides clean drinking water to villagers in Darfur.

There’s a big difference between a community service project and a service-learning project. We had the Sudanese Lost Boys come in and tell their stories to the students. We want them to really take it to heart and have a personal connection with it.

Every year they find ways to take more ownership and make it more of a community event. This is a good age for this project because the kids are able to have a more authentic conversation about the needs of a community.

I have a student who told me that he’s so excited to come in and make extra tapas plates because he feels like he’s helping other people. They really are getting it, that they can be creative problem-solvers through art and that you can use your art to make a difference.



Looking Through a Different Lens

“I think when you have a teacher who looks like you, you can visualize yourself as them one day.

You can look at them and believe that you can achieve all the things that they’ve done.”

Lyndon Brooks, SHHS '03, teaches fifth grade at Woodbury Elementary. After working as a special education aide at Woodbury while pursuing a degree in engineering at Cleveland State, Lyndon made the decision to change course and enter the teaching profession. He shares his Shaker experience from several vantage points – as a student, a teacher, and now as a Shaker parent. Lyndon is also involved in a new initiative to recruit more African-American male teachers to the Shaker Schools.

I had great role models in my time here at Shaker and I kind of wanted to be like them. So when I figured out that teaching was what I wanted to do, I talked to some of them – Danny Young, who is now my boss as the principal of Woodbury, [Mercer principal] Lindsay Florence, and [registrar] Ouimet Smith. They were all really instrumental mentors for me.

When I was a student at Shaker, it was not always smooth sailing. There were a lot of bumpy times. I was kind of a knucklehead – I didn't always apply myself, sometimes I didn't behave well. I was just following the crowd and not making good decisions. I had some very frank conversations with some of those men that kind of got me back in line.



I have students in this classroom where I am their first male teacher. The fact that we have a lack of male teachers in this profession is one thing, but when you add to it the fact that we have such a lack of African-American male teachers, that's an even bigger issue.

I think when you have a teacher who looks like you, you can visualize yourself as them one day. You can look at them and believe that you can achieve all the things that they've done.

With the makeup of our district, it's important for our students to have that feeling. I think we have great role models for students of color – we have great role models in general. But I think we could make an even greater impact if we had more. As an IB District, we want to make sure that all of our students have exposure to different cultural



perspectives. I might see things differently from some of my colleagues; it's not better or worse, it's just a different lens.

I think the idea of equity in education is really important. Life is a challenge for many of our students. As a teacher, a lot of things we deal with to help our students make progress, we have no control over. The home environment has a big impact. Maybe they have a single parent who works multiple jobs, and they have to go with that parent to the job, which makes it hard to get the homework done. Some have very limited access to technology.

Inclusion for kids with special needs is also really important. Having those students feel that they are typical peers does wonders for them. Having other students view them as their typical peers is important as well, to understand that there may be some differences, but in other ways they

are a kid just like you. We need to include those students in the classroom and in every social setting as much as we possibly can.

I teach here and live here because this is home. My mother worked in this district as a special education aide, my brothers and sisters all graduated from here [brother Lloyd is also a teacher, in the Orange City School District]. My parents worked hard to keep us here, even when it wasn't always easy.

When it was time to move back here and teach, I wanted my son to get the same experience I had, both inside and outside the classroom. I'm extremely proud of the direction this district is moving, and I want him to be a part of this. **SL**