

An Education Makes the World a Different Place

By Clyde W. Waite

Growing up in McKeesport, Pennsylvania just at the time when the steel industry was dying and, with it, my hometown was rapidly descending into the depths of despair. In 1962, my fellow teenagers and I were out trying to secure those few available jobs delivering newspapers or setting pins in bowling alleys. Times were hard and getting even harder with each passing day. I was an average student with little interest in doing any better in school.

My guidance counselor decided to place me in a vocational field and concluded that the commercial course, rather than wood shop or the metal works program, might be best for me. With no real resistance from me, typing and shorthand courses was the core curriculum with no foreign language, science or general academic courses being offered. I was the only male in most of my classes, and often the only African American as well. The isolation sapped much of the ambition I might otherwise have had.

If there was one thing I did have great energy about, it was getting out of McKeesport as quickly as I could. The morning after my high school's commencement ceremonies, I was on a train to Washington, DC to seek a secretarial job in one of the federal agencies. On my first day in Washington, I landed a job as a clerk typist at the Library of Congress. I had not thought far enough ahead to realize that I had to find a place to sleep that first night in the big city. I was 18 years old, dragging an old suitcase tied shut with a cord and about \$40 in my pocket. I was fortunate to find a room for rent in a "not-too-seedy side of town".

The odyssey into the world of a real education then began in earnest. Serendipitously, I discovered the campus of Howard University while looking for an affordable apartment. I thought my dreams had come true in the big city when I spotted what I thought was a great looking apartment building with even greater looking girls in almost every window. I promptly made a beeline for the front desk to find out what the rent was and how quickly could I get an apartment there.

The moment the steely-eyed matronly woman at the front desk explained that that was a college girls' dormitory and the only way to live in the other buildings in the complex was to be a Howard University student was the moment of my new quest to become a Howard University student. I immediately found the admissions office to get whatever forms I would need to enroll.

Uncovering the possibility of a university education came about completely by happenstance. The admission process for a high school graduate without prior academic preparation proved to be a daunting experience but as is true in every endeavor in life, once "absolute motivation engages with eminent youthful energy", impressive results are soon to follow. Obviously, outsized tenacity was necessary to enroll in night school for two years only to finally be admitted to Howard after two rejections. The third time was yet another rejection, but a personal meeting

with the admissions officer convinced her that I should be given the chance to fail. I was successful in gaining admission to Howard (as the only student who, in the first semester freshman year, was already on probation). I had to maintain a “C” average in all of my classes to earn the right to continue for the second semester. The “C’s” became “B’s” and then they became “A’s” until I graduated with honors.

During that time, I had the good fortune to meet Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (“SNCC”). I was able to take some time off from my studies at Howard to go to Selma during the violent mid-1960’s to learn what some of the real lessons in life were all about. By then my motivations had matured considerably from those first few days in front of the girl’s dorm.

One of the lessons and motivations I had to integrate into my reality was that even though living in the industrialized north where there was no Jim Crow segregation, there still appeared to be a systematic, albeit a more ‘socially acceptable’ form of exclusion, a separation that perpetuated the disparity between the majority and minority culture.

The competencies that we must all include in our preparation for life is to perfect our communication skills; our problem-solving skills; our ability to interact socially; our efforts at effective citizenship; analysis and to generally learn how to function in a community that is unfamiliar and sometimes hostile. Taking one’s place as a leader or at least one with the ability to be involved with some level of influence demands that one be a critical and reflective thinker. Obviously, that was not the future the McKeesport High School guidance counselors and teachers had envisioned for me.

As we all know, in 1968, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, following on the heels of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, as terrible as those events were, at least had the salutary effect of convincing the major universities to be more open to minority students. Clearly, for that reason, I was admitted to Yale Law School and upon graduation, I went to Bucks County, Pennsylvania just outside of Philadelphia.

However, the community did not accept me with open arms. In fact, the realtors in the area resisted showing me homes and made it difficult for me to buy my first house in Bucks County. My response was to become a realtor and to open my own real estate firm that I kept open and active for over 25 years. I have remained active in the real estate business, and was honored by the town council in Bristol by their naming one of their streets, Clyde Waite Drive.

From the time I set foot in Bucks County, I put both my formal and informal life’s education to good use. I immediately immersed myself in the business, political and social life of the community, unencumbered by my earlier lack of preparation and fully armed with a persistence that has become a defining character trait of the man who would become the first African American or for that matter, the first minority to be elected to county wide office in the history of Bucks County.

In short, I am proud of my accomplishments and forgive my lack of modesty, but false modesty is no virtue in these or in any time. Despite it being my last name and despite the passage of many years, I should not “wait” any longer for someone else to trumpet my triumphs lest it come only as an epitaph. I am quite proud to be called the Honorable Clyde W. Waite, judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County. It took great persistence to reach this office. My prior attempts to secure election to a judgeship, along with a prior attempt to secure election to the office of Clerk of Courts, proved as unsuccessful as my first two attempts to gain admission to Howard University.

I was well aware that I was waging an uphill battle to get elected in a county that was one of Pennsylvania’s three original counties and where in 2003 the black population barely broke 3%. However, not to be discouraged, I made a third attempt to gain election to the court and this time I ran as a Republican. Lo and behold, I was the highest vote getter in a field of eight candidates for four seats on the court, winning on both the Republican and Democratic ballots.

Education was indispensable to my success but not the only key element. We must all have hope, ambition, and persistence. We must recognize that everything we do from our first chore in the morning until our first chore for the next morning, everything has a cause and effect on everything else. In a 1967 Christmas sermon, Martin Luther King Jr. preached,

“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality . . . Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren’t going to have peace on Earth until we recognize the basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”

With those words in mind and in conjunction with the discussions of the learning center, I felt a sense of duty and call to action to help those in McKeesport by co-founding the Anna Middleton Waite Adult Learning Center. I now call out to the community to join in our efforts of continuing adult education classes through your donations.