

Instances of Institutional Racism

By Reyes Ramos

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be the recipient of racist acts? Consider what happened to me, a Mexican American child living in poverty in the 1940s in Houston, Texas. At Robert E. Lee Elementary School, located in an Anglo neighborhood, I was placed in the special education section of the Mexican room . . . based, as far as I can tell, on the fact that I only spoke Spanish. Miss Woods, principal, often took the Mexican American male students out of class and placed us with backs to the wall of the school's main hallway and accused us of any recent crime committed in the Lee neighborhood. This drama was overheard by the Anglo students who used it to taunt us. When I hit the classroom bully, Miss Woods gave me the expected paddling and as she hit me said she could not understand why Mexicans were being educated and that teaching us how to read was a waste of money. Those comments were etched into my soul. Because Miss Woods, unknowingly, beat into me the idea that reading was important, I began to read everything I could get my hands on. I continue to read to this day. I was determined to go to college to "prove her wrong" and completed both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

After high school I looked for office type jobs, but gave up after I saw my job application being torn up after I submitted it. Institutional racism followed me into adulthood. After being in the University of California System (first at Santa Barbara and then San Diego), I made a career move to the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). On arrival at UTA, I wrote a proposal to help minority students succeed in university and was funded by the US Department of Education for three million dollars over three years. The Vice-President for Academic Affairs took the grant away from me and gave it to an Anglo faculty woman. He told me they could not have people "like me" running things at UTA. To force me to go along with what UTA did, the university withheld my monthly paycheck until I signed a form giving permission for their actions.

After two years I moved to CU Boulder where I had a joint appointment between the Arts and Sciences College and the Graduate School of Education. In A&S, I was to direct Chicano Studies and in Education I was to supervise graduate students in the bilingual program. (The department needed to have a bilingual person on staff to satisfy a funding requirement.) On my arrival at CU, the Dean of Education told me the future of Hispanics was tenuous. He also told me that people who look like me could not be in charge of things, even though he thought I was a nice guy and he "liked me". To encourage me to move away, the Dean did not provide file cabinets and bookshelves for my office. Then he complained that I did not spend enough time in my office and labled me a disgruntled employees.

At UTA and CU Boulder, I felt that I had been discriminated against based on ethnicity and that I had a strong case, so I filed a complaint at each university and went through the process set up to ensure fair treatment of employees. I met with representatives of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs

(OFCCP). Agency representatives framed the problem as my word against the word of Deans, Vice-Presidents of Academic Affairs, and University Presidents. Individuals sent to do the investigation met with me and told not to expect much because, as most of them put it, "you are fighting the system and the individual never wins." They were right; they did not do a thorough investigation. I was advised to see it as a bad experience and to go away and look for another job. I did.