

2009

CORETTA SCOTT KING

Women For Diversity Award Winner



Harriet Hughes

by Mikell Worley

“Learn, don't label” is the theme that permeates Harriet Hughes's conversation. Harriet was raised in a Caucasian community, so the concept of diversity was not something she thought about until junior high school, when she attended a week-long conference in West Chester. “Reverend Leon Sullivan spoke. The theme was ‘No Man is an Island.’ He planted a seed that woke me up to a different world. His speech made me realize that we are all connected and we need to do more to help each other. I went home with a different attitude and a different view of the world.”

Her perspective broadened even further when she later attended a school that included minorities. Harriet developed friendships with black students, including a classmate named Mary. Every Saturday morning the school broadcast a radio program that featured Harriet and Mary talking about school events. The friendship between the two has withstood the test of time.

In 1963 Harriet graduated from JP McCaskey High School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. For the following three years she worked for Armstrong World Industries as a lab technician at the Floor Plant. Then she left the workforce to care for her family. "My husband and I each had daughters when we married in 1966. My daughter, Tracy, was three years old and his daughter, Cathy, was four years old. We then had a son, John, together. When John was four years old, we applied to Shared Holiday for a child from Lancaster city to spend two weeks with us in the summer. That is how we came to know Anthony Boynes."

In 1971 Anthony began visiting the Hughes on weekends and during the summer. He soon became a part of the family—then two years later, he became their foster son. "Anthony educated the community about diversity in a very subtle way. He didn't say a word, but by being such a wonderful person, the community learned that he had value. He taught by example. He continues to visit and he is still part of the neighborhood."

As the years went by, the Hughes family welcomed many more children into their home. For some, Harriet and her husband acted as foster parents, for others the Hughes assumed legal guardianship. Those for whom they have cared include Anthony's twin sister, Annette Boynes, as well as James Benson, Roberto Sample, Wilfredo Diaz, Keith Blizzard, Jamael Long, Drew Houng, and Juan Piccirillo. "We are still in touch with all of them, except Keith. We now have 23 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, with another due in April of 2009. We are also fortunate to have my parents and my 96-year-old mother-in-law as part of our family."

Harriet returned to Armstrong in 1980 to work at the research center as a senior research technician until her retirement in 1999. She worked in customer service at Kohl's Department Store for five years and at Fred Groff Funeral Home every other Saturday until 2007. Even though she worked full-time and cared for a much larger than average family, Harriet still found time to volunteer. She donated her time at the Sexual Assault Prevention and Counseling Center (YWCA) as a counselor from 1988 through 1996. She also volunteered at Crispus

Attucks Homeless Shelter from its opening in 1994 until 2000. Now she is "completely" retired.

The logistics of keeping the family in touch can be challenging, but the Hughes have come up with a creative solution. They meet for breakfast at a local restaurant on the first Sunday of every month. Sometimes there are five of them and sometimes there are 30. Friends are welcome to join. Everyone pays his or her own way and no one has to cook or clean-up.

Harriet is humble and thankful for the Women of Distinction award and extends the credit to others. "It is such an honor to be receiving this award. I am still letting it set in. The entire family is responsible; it's just that you are talking to me." Harriet is grateful that her first three children, Cathy, Tracy, and John, were accepting and welcoming as the family grew and living space in the home diminished. "They opened their hearts. It wasn't always easy to share their mom and dad."

In years past when she would tell her husband that another child needed a home, he would say, "We just can't do anymore." They would then find a way to add one more. There are advantages to having such an extensive family. "My husband has taught a Bible study at the Lancaster County Juvenile Detention Center for 19 years and because of our large family he relates well to all of the teenagers.

"I've watched my grandchildren and great-grandchildren all play together without [them] giving any thought to differences. If we don't label, we will be open to learning. And there is so much to learn. There is so much good in every culture!"

Harriet appreciates the progress she has observed over the years. "When we first had minority children in our family I was unable to find birthday cards or Christmas ornaments with minority faces. That always bothered me. I was thrilled when I found the first black Santa. Now I can even send my grandchildren cards with pictures of children who look like them. Our Christmas tree has white Santas and black Santas, white angels, black angels, and Hispanic angels. Now I feel better about our tree."

The most valuable lesson that Harriet has learned is that God put each child into their care to provide the family with an opportunity to learn. Sometimes the children learn from each other or from their parents, while other times the parents learn from the children. "I have always believed that God brings us together with others for a reason. What a blessing He has given to me." ❖