Blind Faith

In the segregated Deep South, a young girl peers through a tall fence and finds her life's work.

By Elaine Lacour Brown, BS'70, MA'71, EdS'73

Faith, said Martin Luther King, is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. His words convey the essence of who I have become. Throughout my life I have taken steps not knowing where I would end up, but feeling it was the right thing for me to do.

As a young girl I knew I wanted to be a special educator. I attended elementary school at the Southern University Laboratory School in Baton Rouge, La. Our playground was divided by a fence that must have been 10 feet tall. On the other side of that fence was the Louisiana School for the Blind for Negroes. I would talk to the kids through the fence and watch in awe as some read their Braille books. I wanted badly to know more about how they learned. Once we completed the sixth grade, we no longer used that playground, but the image of those kids on the other side of the fence was imprinted on my mind.

My father, a law professor at the university, provided our family of seven children with comfort, security and an education. My mother, who holds a bachelor's degree in French and a master's degree in social work, was a housewife who helped us believe we could do whatever we wanted.

Nevertheless, we lived in the Deep South, the segregated South. I experienced racism and discrimination early. I remember going to Sears downtown and sneaking drinks from the whites-only water fountains. I remember having to buy burgers at a special window at drive-ins—there was no sitting inside. There were "colored" waiting rooms at doctors' offices and a Negro baby ward at the hospital. But it was the circus coming to town that was the occasion for my biggest disappointment.

The TV advertisements showed acrobats on tightropes, elephants standing on their hind legs, and all the excitement that surrounds a circus. I had read about such an event in our basal readers, which showed pictures of white children at the Big Top. The circus was to be held at the municipal stadium, and we would have to sit in a designated section.

To my parents, that was not an option. You either sat where you wanted or you did not go. I was 36 years old before I saw my first circus.

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Not being able to move freely in society, my family did not take long trips involving hotel stays and restaurants unless relatives or friends lived along the way. When we visited grandparents, my mother packed a lunch. When it was time to eat, my dad purchased soft drinks at a gas station while the rest of us waited in the car. Instead of using the usually filthy "colored bathrooms" in rural Louisiana, my brothers went behind a tree. My mother, sister and I used open car doors as a privacy screen. I am eternally grateful for rest stops, airports and hotels.

Such degradation could have forced me to feel malformed because I was hated. Instead, we grew stronger because we had a sense of community knitted together by shared emotions, shared interests and values, mutual support and common enemies. Baton Rouge offered a few advantages because of the influence of the black university. We had our own black theaters, swimming pools, golf course, arts, doctors, lawyers and schools. The sense of community was strong and sheltering and enriching.

When the Civil Rights Movement began, I was too young to demonstrate, but not too naïve to realize that history was happening before my very eyes. Boosted by the movement and faith in the efforts of its leaders, I was inspired to make integration a reality no matter the sacrifices. I was one of four black girls accepted at the all-white, all-girl Catholic high school. It was a monumental step not just because we were making history, but because it was important for someone to clear the road that had been fought for.

At St. Joseph's the other girls welcomed us. Under the leadership of a liberal mother superior, we were the only school that expe-

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rienced no outrageous hate incidents that first day of integration. We later found out Mother Alice had made it clear to the other students that they would either accept the change or move on. During the two years we spent at St. Joe's, a sense of community emerged. We felt connected and accepted. We all got over our fears, got to know each other and dispelled myths. Many of those relationships endure. Last spring 11 of us relived our senior trip at a 40-year reunion in New York City.

After graduating from the academy, I went to Louisiana State University, where I sometimes felt I had gone back down the staircase. Racism was alive. I always had a whole row to myself in classes. No one dared sit next to me. I stayed the year because I still believed that persevering would make it better for posterity.

One day while studying in the library, I happened across a Peabody College handbook. The special education section was the largest one I had ever seen. The vision of the playground stirred.

That next year, in the fall of 1967, I came to George Peabody College for Teachers. After meeting me at the train station and helping me unload my bags at the dormitory, my white roommate was asked if she wanted to change rooms. Until then the dorm staff had been unaware that I was black. To my roommate, it was no surprise—we had already corresponded, and we roomed together through our junior year.

I later became student president of that dorm. My husband, Toyo, MME'68, and I shared the role of head resident for six years.

During my sophomore year the campus was abuzz when I announced that I would go through the Rush process. The occasion of joining what had been an all-white local sorority was cause for a gigantic *Tennessean* newspaper article. I pledged and enjoyed my "sisterhood."

I also became a gymnastics team member. I fully participated in campus activities. A sense of community grew at Peabody. As mostly aspiring teachers, my fellow Peabody classmates shared a philosophy of helping students realize their potential. We struggled through the assassination of Martin Luther King, the subsequent riots, busing for racial equality. Another of our great struggles was getting the university to allow women to wear pants on campus!

A community also formed with our black brothers across the street at Vanderbilt, who had a bit harder road to tread. The pioneering efforts of legends like the Rev. James Lawson, '71, and my contemporaries, Perry Wallace, BE'70, and the late Walter Murray, BA'70, MMgmt'74, helped us all endure some of the back stair steps. But at Peabody a far greater task of educating children remained our connection, our common interest.

Peabody gave me the skills I would need in the classroom. It fueled my passion to teach. And I learned Braille, the phenomenon I had first encountered on that playground back in Baton Rouge. I have three degrees from Peabody. My adult life began there. I met the man who would become my husband, I landed my first teaching job at the Kennedy Center, and I had my first two children while Toyo and I directed North Hall.

Then with great faith I took the next step. The Tennessee School for the Blind was starting a program for students with multiple disabilities in addition to blindness, and I was hired to begin one of the new classes for students with deaf-blindness. For 28 years I watched the program for multiple disabilities grow from two classrooms to a whole new building complex, cottage, and a specialized curriculum for those students. In 2003 I took another step and became the outreach and admissions director. I now touch the lives of visually impaired students across Tennessee.

In my new position I host tours for groups, including a twice-a-year visit from Peabody Professor Sharon Shields' Health Services to Diverse Populations class. We also partner with Project PAVE (Providing Access to the Visual Environment), which ensures students have access to low-vision devices.

Just as the sense of community was fundamental during the Civil Rights Movement, it remains a necessity for many minority communities today, and it is vital for visually impaired students. At Tennessee School for the Blind, our students feel secure in a stable environment. We teach them to access resources and ease their transition to the broader sighted world. For students with severe disabilities, I like to think the lives of their parents are also changed by our relieving their feelings of devastation and helping them realize a greater potential in their child. Their sense of community, too, is widened.

I have climbed many stair steps and, just as Martin Luther King could see the mountaintop, I can just about see the top of the staircase. I am growing old, and I know there are others who will follow. I say to the young people out there, keep climbing. Have faith that mankind will someday realize Martin Luther King's beloved community. To paraphrase one of his speeches: Let us be dissatisfied with vestiges of racism and discrimination in any form; let us be dissatisfied until no child is hungry and all people are sheltered. Work toward equal employment, a fairer society and worldwide peace. Keep a sense of history and whence you have come. If we are not aware of what we owe to the past, we are less aware of what we owe to the future. **V**

This essay is adapted from a Jan. 25 speech made by Elaine Brown at Peabody College on the occasion of her receiving the 2007 Changing Lives Award, which is presented annually by Peabody's departments of psychology and human development and special education to recognize exceptional service by an African-American citizen to his or her community. Brown has served on both the Peabody and Vanderbilt alumni boards of directors. She and her husband, Toyo, MME'68 (Peabody), are charter members of the Association of Vanderbilt Black Alumni.