

CULTURAL DIVERSITY FORUM

OPENING ADDRESS

“At the Cross Roads: From the Past and into the Future”

Good morning and welcome. (Sign also) Bonjour et bienvenue. Buenos días y bienvenidos. My name is Olivia Chapa, and I am a Spanish teacher at Kaffie Middle School. I will be your guide today for the implementation of, to my knowledge, the first-ever Cultural Diversity Forum in Corpus Christi, Texas. To begin our efforts today, I am going to answer a few questions. First, why was the Cultural Diversity Forum created? Secondly, why are our efforts here so important? Finally, what specifically are our goals today?

Last summer, my very dear friend and my principal, Nancy Benson, communicated to me that the National Diversity Education Program, which is co-sponsored by the Japanese American National Museum and the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy, was asking educators from Michigan, Illinois, Arkansas, California, and Texas to submit applications to:

- Identify the best practices;
- Create, produce, implement, and disseminate new curricula, educational tools, and workshops; and
- Establish a national network committed to a deeper understanding of diversity and American democracy.

According to the National Diversity Education Program news release, (quote) “After receiving a number of outstanding applications, the

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Program accepted twelve exceptional educators who have shown a true commitment to developing meaningful and quality diversity education resources that will impact our country's middle school youth." (end quote) Friends, family, colleagues and new associates, how exciting it is to say that I was one of the twelve educators whose application was accepted, and, that by attending the Cultural Diversity Forum, you are now a part of the National Diversity Education Program.

It is always gratifying to know that we are not alone in our endeavor. As part of the program orientation, the twelve educators were flown to California to visit with advisors, staff, and community members at the Japanese American National Museum and the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy, and I can definitely say, WE ARE NOT ALONE. There were students, business people, actors, military personnel, politicians, and educators of all backgrounds working, visiting, and supporting diversity education. I met a Tuskegee Airman; shook the hand of one of the Atlanta seven of desegregation fame; took a picture with Senator Inouye of Hawaii, a major force in the development of the co-sponsors, and was congratulated for my efforts by one of my celebrity heroes, George Takei of Star Trek fame. Plus we have support from the business community through our esteemed national corporate sponsor, Toyota Motor Sales, USA, Inc. We also have some local sponsors—HEB and Valero both providing sustenance for our very important task, as well as, the office of the Corpus Christi Independent School District's Assistant Superintendent, Scott Elliff, providing the elegant surroundings. We must also commend the staff and administrators of Wynn Seale Academy, especially the principal, Delia Montelongo McLerran. Today you will interact with many individuals from many organizations attending and

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supporting our efforts. We also have students from approximately 25 schools, who by participating here today, demonstrate parental commitment. Yes, WE ARE NOT ALONE!

As I discuss the importance of all of these efforts, the reference of “At the Cross Roads will become apparent. Although we have had many successes in the twentieth century, which are substantial when you consider such strides in the right direction as desegregation, bilingual education, Title XIX, and ethnic studies, we have reached a point in time where the successes of the past must be surpassed. We have to make our efforts toward diversity education in this new century so magnificent and impactful, that the next cross roads will need only a small clean up crew. What we achieved in the last century cannot be diminished, nor can we be satisfied with what many of us have left as a legacy towards equality, justice, and the acceptance of differences.

In the twenty-first century we must make our efforts towards cultural diversity, with the clear intent of preserving our democratic way of life, a priority. While some may still view cultural diversity as a threat and perhaps even a divisive strategy, there appears before us a wave of increasing energy towards building respect and understanding through diversity education. If you wish to explore the various aspects of cultural diversity, be prepared to travel through a labyrinth of information and organization appearing to possess enough energy to see us through this century.

As predictably happens with the opportunity to extend to a cosmopolitan view of a topic, cultural diversity in the worldwide community expands to unprecedented proportions. In 1991 the 185-member United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (known as

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UNESCO) issued the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity proclaiming it to be, “a new universal ethic in the cause of development and peace.” Further clarification emerged in September 2002 with the Johnnesbug Declaration on Sustainable Development acknowledging that:

“Our rich diversity, which is our collective strength, should be used to ensure sustainable development. Cultural Diversity, indeed, is not just a natural fact that we need simply recognize and respect. It is about plurality of knowledge, wisdom and energy which all contribute to improving and moving the World forward.”

Through UNESCO, the worldwide community has expanded the dimensions of cultural diversity to include every facet of human existence, from languages and the arts to the extremely vital issue of human rights. In far reaching statements, UNESCO defines culture in such tangible yet abstract terms as art, literature, and lifestyles, as well as intangible terms such as spiritual and emotional features of society. Within a series of forums, conferences, declarations, publications and programs, such issues as endangered languages and living human treasures become established in the world as part of cultural diversity. The ramifications for the teaching and learning process, whether in or outside of the classroom, create new horizons to be reached.

Turning our attention back to the United States, we now have a new wave of educational concern relating to the issue of cultural diversity. Educators face the challenge of the increased cultural differences of the students in the classroom and of how diversity issues influence instruction and student success. A serious issue in our nation today is how to meet the educational needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. One educator expresses concern in this manner:

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"If current trends in educational achievement continue, millions of students ...will not obtain the education necessary for full participation in the economic and civic life of the country. Furthermore, the inequality that results from differences in educational achievement of children is likely to make the social stability of the United States increasingly doubtful."

This concern focuses on the fact that a democracy will not long endure without an educated populace. In addition, an educated populace means that cultural diversity must be addressed with full attention to the impact of this specific issue on academic achievement. Teachers and schools must be prepared to meet the needs of children of all backgrounds and heritages. Educators must begin to meet the challenges of a culturally diverse populace by assuring that the relationship between culture, development, and education become a priority. That ladies and gentlemen and young people, is what we are doing today, making cultural diversity a priority.

For the remainder of the day we will explore the essential question of the National Diversity Education Program, outline the many efforts already existing in our community, and hopefully discover ways to assure diversity education in our classrooms. We will also provide input into a document I will create, which I have tentatively titled, A Community Guide to Promoting Cultural Diversity. It is my hope and desire that this be a first small step, if you will, towards uniting all of us towards a common goal of developing meaningful and quality diversity education that will impact our country's, and, of course, more specifically, our community's middle school youth. I am grateful for your willingness to dedicate your time

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towards this end by attending my contribution to the National Diversity Education Program through the Cultural Diversity Forum.

To start us on an inspiring and positive note, I have invited two guest speakers who actually need no introduction in our community. Our first speaker will give us a little push in the right direction in considering the essential question: Why and how is diversity the foundational and functional basis for American democracy? Who better to say the first words, than someone who became involved in representing our community when the Cross Roads we spoke about earlier were not even on the map? I will bet that he remembers the times when, as my father told me he had experienced, Mexicans were told to use the back door. I definitely know he remembers the time before bilingual education when first grade Mexican children were required to stay in the first grade two years because of language barriers. He truly knows how far we have come and how far we still have to travel. Ladies and gentlemen and young people, it is my honor to present to you our very own Senator Carlos Truan.

(Senator Truan speaks:

“Diversity: The Foundational and Functional
Basis for American Democracy”)

The next speaker has also dedicated his life to the people of our community, first as an educator, and then as a pastor. But do you think he has ever given up his contributions towards quality education. Of course not! He continues to provide his expertise and inspiration to our school district through today. In the past, he has taken many of our schools from the bottom to the top, and I know he will start our efforts here today in a very positive direction so that we start at the top. Ladies and gentlemen

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and young people, it is my pleasure to introduce one of the best friends
the young people of our community have ever had and my dearest friend,
Dr. Rev. Richard Peltz.

(Dick speaks: "Tapestry")

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