In 1969, my first grade class was revolutionary. The school custodian’s African American daughter, whose family lived in our school, was admitted as a member of our class and the first person of color admitted to the school. I remember at the start of the year our teacher pointing at her and sternly telling us not to tease her. Years later talking to my parents, I learned that the school expounded itself as a place of “tolerance” to influence some of the parental uncertainty about admitting a child of color.

Many things about this brief story make our 2018 understanding of the world shutter. While the independent school community has much equity and inclusion work still to do, the shutter that this story gives us is a sign of how far we have come in 50 years. One of the best areas for independent schools to see progress, and I would contend hope for the future, is with equity and inclusion. To shine light on this progress, I teamed up with Caroline Blackwell, NAIS Vice President for Equity and Justice. Caroline interviewed three members of our independent school network, chronicled below, who have a long history with diversity work.

Jim Scott has worked in independent schools for more than 40 years: eight years as a teacher at Stevenson School in Pebble Beach, California, nine years as head at Catlin Gable School in Portland, Oregon, and now 25 years as head at Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Jacqueline Pelzer has been the executive director of Early Steps since 1988, and before that she was a teacher for over two decades. She has held positions on the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Board, both as Secretary and Chair of the Equity and Justice Committee.
Lewis Bryant is the director of Multi-Culturalism at Buckingham Brown and Nichols School. He grew up attending a variety of schools, moving from an alternative school that enrolled approximately 40% black students, to a military academy, and then to a school that was only black students. In his 35 years in education, or preparing to work in education, he has “…worked in multiple environments, cultures, and languages, and with a variety of races, ethnicities and classes.”

How has the concept of diversity changed over the years?

Diversity – not

If you go back far enough many independent schools were places designed not to be diverse. In fact, parents wanted their children to only be with children who shared the same color, religion, or income bracket. As a student, Jacqui Pelzer went to a school during a time when the law required the segregation of races. While the law no longer required segregation during her first job as a teacher, that was still the reality, and she learned how to teach pride and culture to those who were excluded from the majority.

We started with “tolerance” defined as numbers

All three who were interviewed pointed out that the beginnings of diversity in independent schools were all about the “numbers,” typically defined by “how many black children where in the school.” Lewis reflected that initially some schools saw diversity as the work of the athletic department. He said “I intentionally went out and recruited the least athletic black boys I could find.” Jim recounted that early efforts were not embraced by all parents and faculty. Many understood it as a “zero sum game” and that helping one group meant that other groups would suffer. Jacqui noted the focus on numbers (not people) created “a revolving door – there were three brown kids, they weren’t always the same three brown kids.”

Going beyond the numbers

Schools soon discovered that simply focusing hard on numbers didn’t yield success and searched for how to improve. Schools discovered they needed to focus more on the people. Jacqui pointed out that these well-intentioned early days of focusing on culture were more of a celebration of stereotypes with things like students being encouraged to bring in examples of “their food” and kitchen workers having a day to wear their sombreros. The intention to learn more about different cultures with very few minorities present created the burden for students and teachers who were the representative/spokesperson of their entire group. Other well-intentioned communities denied people’s identity with the messaging that “we are all the same here.”

Each person is known

Lewis pointed out that a major advance with the rise of a school’s diversity and

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Continues on page 28
Continued from page 27

awareness was the movement from diversity that looked simply at race to recognition and goals around multi-culturalism. This movement, along with the rise in the number of diverse people increased the recognition that a group is not a monolith, but there is much diversity within each group. Schools moved away from “we” have groups that are “honored guests,” to seeing a community made up of myriad individuals each with a unique history, culture, and set of privileges.

What should fill us with optimism about diversity in independent schools?

What makes Jim hopeful around the issues of diversity and equity and justice? Having followed three schools over the course of nearly 42 years, Jim reflects that schools “…have continued with the commitment to diversity … some of the seeds that we started, some of the relationships that we built, and the culture that we embraced … are still there. That comes from ethos and culture but also … from the continuity of trustees understanding their stewardship role with the values of the school.”

Jim continues, “I’m optimistic about the social justice values of the millennials.” People his age are becoming grandparents, and their children are now the parents, the millennials, and “…believe in a larger public purpose of their schools.” Jim sees that we have “…parents who are interested in having their schools be a cross section of their community. … If most of our mission is preparation for college and beyond … we are preparing our kids for colleges that are probably more diverse than our current schools.” Providing today’s students with the right tools for leadership and for future workplace success means “…they must come from more diverse environments.”

Lewis spoke at length. “One thing that makes me hopeful is seeing the young, passionate, really, really intelligent and articulate leaders
of color who are in leadership roles across the country. On a personal level, it does my heart good to see that kind of progress and to know there are folks out there who will be carrying the torch. ... Not just to see the numbers, but seeing people on that leadership path and their passion for the work. ... I’ve come to the conclusion that one of the mistakes that independent schools have made, and probably the whole educational arena, is the whole diversity course has been built on the backs of black and brown folks ideally in the effort of supporting and serving them. ... In that process we’ve been missing 80-90% of the population in terms of their education. ... My real push and my optimism is that we have to educate white folks... for years I really couldn’t even talk about white privilege because it was such a loaded concept to white folks – they didn’t want to hear it, they didn’t want to address it, they didn’t want to delve into it. I think a lot of schools are still in that place. Fortunately my school has had a white privilege group working for the last two years so I’m optimistic... about educating all parts of the population, and [it] really means supporting all parts of the population because as Gary Howard said ‘You can’t teach what you don’t know.’ ... For me, it’s been a very rewarding journey.”

Jacqui believes that boards are realizing that they need to have an equity/justice statement, a diversity statement. She is hopeful because people are “...still doing the work... not saying ‘check, done.’ They know that this is evolutionary, they know that they keep changing and as they change, they have to re-do things they thought they had done because it’s a new cast of characters.”

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Jacqui continued, “...one of the things that really gives me hope is the number of kids of color who are independent school alums who are coming back to work in their schools. In the early days, lots of our kids walked away and did not want to look back, they got their diploma and they were done. Now they are coming back, and they come back for lots of reasons—all of them good—some of them to make it different from what it was when they were there, others because they value so much what they got. ... Being in the company of black males who are coming back to their schools, because we know they often have among the harder times (although our girls do suffer), to see them coming back and rising in leadership and watching as they raise their hands at institutes. They want to be a head of school. ...[this] gives me such hope for tomorrow”.

“I think the thing that makes me most hopeful

Continues on page 30
about the future is that in many of our schools, having a diverse, inclusive everything—curriculum, kids, faculty—is not a surprise. More and more schools are saying 'this is who we are and if this doesn’t work for you, it’s not where you want to be.' Schools haven’t always done that. ...what makes me most hopeful is that schools continue to do the work, and can’t continue to do the work the way they did it before, the same work. They know they need to grow that work and expand that work. ... For the longest time this work was more like that teacher ... who didn’t teach 25 years, he taught one year 25 times. ...cultural sensitivity is much more a part of the ethos ... and we’re at a point where there are schools ready to join the schools that already are becoming institutional places of social justice.” “We need kids who want to be a part of the political process, ...we need the new voices to have an awareness and a sensitivity and for being with people who are not like them to be so much of who they are. ... I look at my son’s friends’ pictures and it looks like ... it was Noah’s Ark, there are just so many kinds of people, all people who have been friends for a long period of time now. And that is what we what.”

“‘Nobody is there yet and the truth of the matter is that hopefully nobody will ever get there ... this is definitely work to be a lifelong learner.’”

Caroline Grace Blackwell is Vice President, Equity and Justice, at the National Association of Independent Schools. She is a passionate teacher of advocacy. Through her leadership she aims to orient diversity, equity, and inclusion work so that it encompasses the broadest range of human differences and experiences, which are fundamental to interpersonal, professional, and institutional strength. A foodie and recovering serious person, you can contact Caroline at blackwell@nais.org or on Twitter @inclusionleader.

Bob Mattingly is executive director of CSEE. Previous to CSEE, he was the Director of Accreditation and Member Services for the Association of Independent Maryland and DC Schools, Head of the Chesapeake Montessori School, and Admissions and Financial Aid Director and Teacher at Gonzaga College High School. He has a Masters in Theology from Boston College, Masters in Ethics from Loyola University, and a Masters in Educational Administration from Harvard University. Bob enjoys writing and speaking on a variety of topics including character and inclusion.