

Remarks of Hayes Mizell on September 14, 2010, at the Southern Education Leadership Initiative Internship Closing Program. Sponsored by the Southern Education Foundation, the internship program "places the brightest, most inspired and promising students into leading and worthy non-profit organizations and foundations involved in stellar work to reduce educational inequities." Twenty-five interns participated in this year's program. The Closing Program was held at the Georgia Tech Hotel & Conference Center in Atlanta, GA. Mizell participated on the panel, "Passing the Torch: Perspectives from SEF Intern Alumni." He is the Distinguished Senior Fellow of the National Staff Development Council.

What Needs to be Done

I appreciate this opportunity to reflect very briefly on my work during the past 45 years and how I intersected with the Southern Education Foundation during that time.

I graduated from college in 1960 and the following decade shaped my subsequent work life and relationships. When I became a graduate student in American history at the University of South Carolina, I had only a vague idea of what I wanted to do with my life. I was a moderate Southerner from a lower middle class, Christian home who, while in college and unlike most of my contemporaries, had begun to develop a perspective that was politically liberal. The values of fair play I had learned at home and church seemed at odds with the political and racial mores of the small world around me. Through relationships with graduate school friends who were more enlightened than I, my political perspectives became somewhat more sophisticated, I became active in an organization called the South Carolina Student Council on Human Relations, and on February 17, 1961 I found myself participating in a lunch counter sit-in in downtown Columbia, South Carolina.

During the next two years, I concluded that I was not cut out to be a historian, and decided that I wanted to work professionally in a field that was then called

“human relations” or “inter-group relations.” However, there were very few opportunities for that kind of work in the South so, looking around for something else to do, I entered the United States Information Agency as a “foreign service career reserve officer trainee” and moved to Washington, DC. After only nine months, I had an opportunity to become the executive director of the Southern Student Human Relations Project of the National Student Association so I left the USIA in 1964 and moved to Atlanta where the project office was located. My tenure there was only two years and I think it is fair to say that I knew very little about what I was doing. The project was financed almost entirely by a foundation grant and my leadership was sufficiently uninspiring that the foundation did not renew the grant.

I had no prospect for another job that was of interest to me. However, by this time the American Friends Service Committee has created what it euphemistically called a School Desegregation Task Force, composed of only several people working throughout the South. AFSC was interested in posting a full-time field worker in South Carolina and I was lucky enough to get the job.

Let me pause here to say that as I look back on this period, I would describe it as the beginning of a life in which I could not imagine how I would ever do what I wanted to do because I had only a vague understanding of it, but in fact my life turned out exactly as I had hoped. With the benefit of hindsight, I now believe this was all Providential, the grace of God at work decades before I even understood what that meant. I knew that I had no particular interest in making money, even though I had never had any. I knew that I would be terrible as a business person. I

knew that I was not cut out for a profession such as law or medicine, and, in fact, I was not particularly ambitious, or at least not as that word is commonly understood. Yet, I sensed there was a calling that was drawing me forward. Out of naiveté or desperation or faith, I acceded to that call. My advice to you, therefore, is to listen for that which is calling you to vocation, not just employment, and to seek and respond to opportunities that enable you to grow into that mission.

In 1966, I moved to Columbia where my job was to monitor the implementation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, explain to African-American citizens their rights under the school desegregation provisions of the law, advocate for speedy desegregation of public schools, and share what I was learning with federal officials charged with school desegregation implementation. Consistent with the zeitgeist of the 1960s, I assumed a fairly high public profile, leading a local newspaper editorial to describe me as a “double-dipped integrationist long active in civil rights causes.” In fact, most of my activities were what I now describe as at the remote periphery of the civil rights movement.

It was during this period that I came into first contact with the Southern Education Foundation. I always considered meetings at SEF as a kind of sanctuary, one of the few places in the region where there were people who understood and were sympathetic with the work of my AFSC colleagues and I. I participated as a kind of guest in the very first incarnation of the SEF internship program and later I hosted an intern for a year. Of course, at that time SEF was a grantmaking foundation and for a number of years SEF awarded grants to the AFSC project of which I was only one part. John Griffin, the SEF president at that time, used to

delight in recalling a \$6,000 grant to my office that enabled us to research and advocate the need for state school finance reform; that work laid the groundwork for the enactment of such reform in the 1970s.

As school desegregation in South Carolina was achieved in the 1970s, my office turned its attention to other education issues that impacted African-American constituencies on whose behalf we had been advocating. This took us into issues such as school fees, student discipline, federal support for public schools, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the creation of a state human rights agency. I worked for AFSC in South Carolina from 1966 until 1982, and for most of that period we were never larger than a staff of five, and sometimes a staff of two or three.

It was my tenure with AFSC that brought me into contact with local people of great courage and determination. These were people with intellect and gifts that the South said it valued, but the South had purposely prevented them from developing their minds and their talents, and using their minds and talents to benefit their families and communities. Of course, this is not a phenomenon of the last century, and this leads me to my second piece of unsolicited advice. Today, there are people in every community of the South who are undervalued, underdeveloped, and underserved. Racial and class discrimination are still facts of life in these communities, though somewhat less visible under the patina of real and imagined progress. The brutal consequences are nevertheless very real for victims of low-expectations, a post-literate culture, toxic hopelessness, and minimal exposure to a wider world of intellectual stimulation and opportunities. These people need *you*.

While there are now all manner of federal, state, and local support systems that in one way or another are intended to benefit these people, many are straight-jacketed bureaucracies with little room for creativity and risk-taking. Therefore, I encourage you to find or create work venues where the development of people takes precedence over protection of the institutions designed to serve them. An alternative is to focus your energies on reforming those institutions, but be forewarned that is likely to be a frustrating and lifelong endeavor. That does not mean you should avoid it, but you should be realistic about the commitment you are making.

After my years with AFSC, I was in a hiatus of consulting and then working with a South Carolina project called the State Employment Initiatives for Youth project. I was on a path to what would probably have been an unhappy sinecure in state government until two state senators threatened to stall the entire state budget because it included my position. They said they could not vote to support me because in their view I had “worked for a Communist-front organization,” the American Friends Service Committee.

Consequently, in 1987 I was once again within a month of being unemployed. The phone rang, and it was an executive search firm inquiring about my possible interest in a position with the education program of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York. For some time, I had aspired to work for a foundation but assumed that in light of my non-traditional career trajectory that was unlikely to happen. Again, Providence intervened. I got the job and worked at the Clark Foundation from 1987 until mid-2003.

During my years at the Foundation, I had the opportunity to promote and assist reform of middle schools in a small number of urban school systems throughout the country. When I began that job, someone congratulated me on my “new career.” But to me, I was merely continuing the work I had been doing for many years, only now I no longer had to rely primarily on moral suasion. In fact, the foundation expected program officers at the foundation to use its resources to provide leadership to their respective fields and leverage improved practice among grantees.

As a field, philanthropy can offer wonderful opportunities to make an impact, though there is great variation among funders as to their philosophies, cultures, objectives, and styles. It is also true that some foundations are insufferable institutions that treat grant-seekers shabbily, use a heavy hand to impose their will on grantees, and are risk-averse. Thankfully, there are some activist philanthropies that use their resources to advance good causes that have difficulty gaining support from other organizations. Some seek to develop true partnerships that challenge and assist grantees, and hold them accountable for meaningful results. But the bottom line in philanthropy is that a foundation cannot make anything happen; it can challenge, influence and guide, but by itself it cannot change the facts on the ground. Only grantees can make that happen, so the perennial issue for funders is to identify potential grantees with the vision, will, creativity, and know-how to improve the lives of real people in real local contexts. I hope that in the years to come some of you will occupy roles in philanthropy, and that you will use your positions not to play it safe, but to advance changes that are unlikely without your

encouragement and support. For those of you who will be working in non-profits, and will seek grants from funders, I hope you will be bold in conceiving proposals, focusing on obtaining funding for *what could be* rather than for *what is*.

My story is unique to me, just as each of your stories is unique to you. There is no roadmap for your futures except the one you either design or search to follow. Because you are SEF interns, I know you have experiences, talents, and education that greatly exceed mine at your age. At this time in your lives and in this economy, perhaps you are concerned about finding a job. I encourage you to instead be concerned about your calling, your integrity, who you serve, and how—all of which are like wires in a cable that connects directly to your soul.

Particularly in public education, there are young people who are sinking. What they crave and what they need is attention from people who believe in their latent abilities and who are committed to developing them. Just this week Venture Philanthropy Partners announced that it is investing \$5.5 million in the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a network of 55 charter schools that serve low-income children who attend the middle grades. Rigorous evaluations have found that KIPP provides significant education benefits to children who attend the schools and that is manifest in their achievement. I am sure that in the early 1990s when two disgruntled young teachers left their public schools to start the first KIPP school they had no idea there would ultimately be the network of schools that now exist, or that sizable grants would finance the school's expansion. I don't know how the KIPP founders would describe their experience, but I assume they stepped out on faith, knowing what had to be done and taking the risks necessary to do it. I hope that

wherever you work, you will hold fast to a clarity of vision that enables you to see what needs to be done and to do it.

Thank you.

Links to other Mizell speeches/articles are at <http://www.nsd.org/news/authors/mizell.cfm>

Mizell's blogs are at <http://www.nsd.org/learningBlog/archives.cfm/category/hayes-mizell>