

The “Open Door” and Beyond

Kayla Begg

“Just because you... open your doors doesn’t mean you’re going to get people to come in, right?”

-- Alumnus Alex Chaves

The Jesuits have a tradition of pushing boundaries and charging new frontiers, often trailblazing where their contemporaries hesitate to do so. Loyola Marymount, as the only Catholic Jesuit University in the city of Los Angeles, is an example of this unique heritage. Throughout its history, Loyola University of Los Angeles, as it was originally called before the merger of 1973, made its commitment to social justice known by habitually opening its doors to a more diverse student body and academic community. However, despite this admirable “open door” policy, Loyola’s student population, along with that of its sister school, Marymount College, remained almost exclusively white for the first half of its history.

The journey to a more diverse community began with Fr. Edward J. Whelan, S.J., who served as Loyola University’s ninth president from 1942 to 1949. Fr. Whelan, who was deeply concerned about the internment of thousands of Japanese-Americans during World War II, was known for his efforts to hire and house as many Japanese-Americans as possible once they were released at the end of the war. This legacy was continued by Fr. Charles Casassa, S.J. - the succeeding president – who was not only involved with the city on various commissions regarding human rights, but also continued to try and bring in more diverse students.

Edison Miyawaki, who was raised in Japan and became the first Asian American to attend Loyola University in 1948, was at the epicenter of this momentous shift. “I was the first Asian on campus, so it was difficult. It was difficult to get adjusted. And I was lonesome. I didn’t know anyone,” he said. Originally recruited by Fr. Lorenzo Malone, S.J., to play baseball for Loyola University, Miyawaki was forced to overcome language barriers and adapt to a new and unfamiliar environment. “To be very honest, it was a difficult time. My youthful days were in Japan, so my major language was Japanese. I briefly was in Hawaii to kind of get myself reeducated in English. So my first few years at Loyola, I had a difficult time in the English language,” he said.

In spite of the difficult adjustment and culture shock, Miyawaki stated that he never felt discriminated against for being the only Asian American on a predominantly white campus. “The students, many of them became close friends. And every one of them went out of their way to be helpful to me. And they knew that I was homesick and I was lost. I did have a difficult time with my English language. Every single one of them was very, very good to me, and I’m forever grateful to these people,” he said. As Miyawaki put it, he was many “firsts” throughout his life, especially at Loyola University. “I was the first Asian American to be elected as student body treasurer during my junior year ... I’m unique, in a sense. Gosh, the first Asian living in a dormitory, the first Asian to go on to medical school in the East Coast at George Washington University, the first Asian sitting in a chemistry class at Loyola,” he marveled.

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Although Miyawaki’s uplifting story was an exception, the post-war era continued to mark small steps forward for Loyola. For example, in 1950, Loyola’s renowned football team forfeited a game to Texas Western because the Southern university refused to let African American players compete, which would have excluded player Bill English and trainer Oscar Cunningham from participating in the game. As Father Casassa reportedly stated: “All play or None play.” Thus, while the student body itself did not reflect a very diverse environment, moments such as these in LMU’s history highlight its mission in action and the University’s commitment to social justice.

Not surprisingly, some minority students in the 1950s saw Loyola University as an opportunity to pursue a higher education in a more tolerant environment. Dr. Bill Grisby, a 1956 African American graduate who was born and raised in Texas, said, “I just wanted to attend a good school and wanted to get away from the South, and the segregation of the South at the time.” Grisby made an unusual choice enrolling at Loyola University, as most of his friends chose to attend traditional all-African American colleges, such as Wiley College, Prairie View A&M University and Bishop College. “I think I was the only African American student in my class [at Loyola],” he continued. “And then there were two others . . . [who] were basketball players, and they were at Loyola on scholarship. So there were only, as I recall, three of us on campus.” As Grisby summarized, Loyola was “... open, but it was not an integrated campus.”

While Grisby felt comfortable on campus, he noted that racial tolerance did not always translate to the local community. “I remember there were a number of ethnic incidents that were happening in L.A. . . . The ethnic atmosphere was not that positive in L.A., at the time I was attending Loyola.” Explaining further, Grisby noted, “I do remember also that Westchester, Westchester was all Anglo and . . . Inglewood High School was all Anglo, and that entire area – Inglewood, Westchester, the beach area – I would say there was maybe a slight tolerance but I never did see an African American in these particular areas,” Grisby recalled. Grisby also remembered that Dr. Kirik, the only African American professor employed at Loyola University at the time, was unable to move into Westchester because the neighborhood was not yet integrated and no one would sell him a house.

During the years that Grisby was attending Loyola University, Marymount College was developing in Palos Verdes. Originally founded in the early 1930s as Marymount Junior College, the school eventually evolved into Marymount College and moved from its original home in Westwood to the Palos Verdes location. By 1966, the ethnic makeup of Loyola’s sister school was almost identical to that which Grisby experienced in the late 50s.

Irma Dillon Brown, a 1970 graduate, described the culture shock she experienced coming to Marymount College from Watts, where the famous Watts Riots of 1965 had recently occurred. “I think there were five identifiable African American females in my class of 85 [students]. And I think of the five, maybe only three of us were openly identified and chose to be identified [as African American],” she commented. “There was a level and degree of wealth that none of us

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had ever known. We were with upper middle class and very wealthy young ladies who had come from very different backgrounds than ours.”

Chad Dreier, a 1969 graduate of Loyola University and the current Chair of the Board of Trustees, echoed Dillon’s statement in regard to the Westchester campus of the 1960s. “I would say in 1965 there [were] 1,000 kids. I bet it was 99% white Catholic. You were either from Loyola High, Serra High or Mount Carmel High, mostly all from southern California. ... It was pretty much a white male Catholic [institution],” he stated.

Dillon’s and Dreier’s time was also the time of Marymount’s move to the Westchester campus. Dillon recalled that after the move, students on campus became more pro-active in these issues – there were enough African American students to create the Black Student Union, and although the student body was not very diverse, she claimed that she did not feel limited by it, remaining active and visible on campus as a leader in student government. “Even though I was in the minority I was very integrated into the community ... and achieved a lot of leadership roles that I obviously could not have done without the support of non-African Americans. I think that that was part of that social justice creating the whole person.”

She commented that the school was very open to bringing speakers involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and one year brought Ron Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa. “They were very open to allowing us to be exposed and appreciated that it was important, not only that we have that kind of exposure for our own edification and self esteem and growth, but that the non-African American students or non-minority students were able to be exposed to another perspective.” Dreier echoed Dillon’s perspective. Noting the impulse of social change, he said that “there were more discussions about African Americans because of the Civil Rights Movement. Once again, like I say, it wasn’t violent and it wasn’t just to make a statement. Society was really changing at that time.”

Still, Dillon did remember experiencing inescapable discrimination, specifically at her graduation from Marymount College. “I can remember the graduation in 1970. I was a graduation speaker and the local newspaper likened me to Angela Davis. ... She was head of the Black Panther Party then. [The paper said] ‘How could the university stoop to that level, to have this African American woman speaking at the graduation? On stage, with priests and these good Catholic girls and stuff?’”

In spite of incidences such as these, many claimed that the schools were welcoming of those of a diverse background. “I really do think they were inclusive,” said Thomas Beck who arrived at Loyola in 1969. “I had fraternity brothers that weren’t Caucasian and I don’t think anyone treated anyone different because of race. I think it was, for the years I was here, I think everybody was colorblind,” Mike Steed, another individual who came to the Westchester campus just as Dillon and Dreier were leaving, noted that Fr. Donald P. Merrifield S.J., who was president of Loyola University at the time, was a particularly active leader in promoting diversity. Fr. Merrifield, who was instrumental in establishing and promoting African American

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and Chicano/a Studies programs on campus, heralded a significant change at Loyola University and Marymount College, moving the two schools from a tradition of tolerance to actively creating a diverse environment. “I would say it was Merrifield's policies during his tenure as president, certainly while I was here, that opened up the University more than any other president prior to him to students of . . . color and students from varying socio-economic levels,” he said.

Not surprisingly, this increasing consciousness regarding issues of race translated to activism off-campus. As Steed noted, “I think the focus, whether it was Black Student Union issues, or whether it was war issues, was . . . that the University should take a more active role in what was taking place,” he said. It was during this time that students started to translate their ethic of social justice to activism for racial equality in the surrounding community. “I remember we went out in the community to demonstrate, so the Westchester Community Center was a fulcrum of activity by the local residents around Loyola, which we felt, as students, was focused on keeping blacks and Hispanics from coming into the community. We had a very specific protest against the Westchester community organizations that were meeting, we felt, to specifically exclude blacks and Hispanics . . . It was quite a time,” he said.

Steed saw his time at Loyola as one where the campus and the University were flooded by new changes and possibilities. “If Loyola was a self-contained community, it opened up when the women came on, it opened up when the demonstrations took place, the demonstrations both on the war and the black student union demonstrations . . . It had to reach out to those students that couldn’t afford this to bring them here, and it had to create diversity. All of that literally took place during that period of time. . . . It's night and day from the '60s and '70s to today – it’s just a different place now.”

The recollections of this critical period mark the end and the beginning: the end of Loyola and Marymount and their separate stories of the open door, and the beginning of the story of Loyola Marymount as a cohesive whole. On the eve of the historic merger, momentous changes were occurring in the journey to promote diversity. These changes would be measured not only by the increasing numbers of students willing to walk through the open door, but also by Loyola Marymount’s ability to create a meaningful sense of inclusion.