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OPINION

It's Time for Hollywood to Act Like Diversity Matters

Losing a seat at the Oscar table

BY MARC H. MORIAL

"Diversity is basically a description of independence. Diversity is what moves the ball for me, and I thought 'give people a chance that have different points of view. Let the audience decide whether they like it or not. But give those voices a chance to be seen and heard.'" — Robert Redford, actor, director, and co-founder of Sundance Film Festival.

Hosted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the 87th annual Academy Awards ceremony — better known as the Oscars — will either best be remembered for the uproar incited by this year's homogenous nominations, or as a seminal moment for change in the Academy's long, non-inclusive history.

For the first time since 1998, the stage has been set for our nation to celebrate its least diverse Oscars. In a year that saw Oscar-worthy turns from several actors of color, none were nominated in the acting categories, with all 20



acting nominations going to white actors. But the story doesn't end there. Not a single woman stood among the five directors and 14 screenwriters nominated in those categories.

In a nation where nearly 51 percent of the population is female, how can formidable directors like Ava DuVernay for *Selma* and Angelina Jolie for *Unbroken* find themselves on the cutting room floor of the nomination selection?

In a nation where, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, "Some 43 percent of millennial adults are non-white, the highest share of any generation," how does the Academy's nominees not reflect Hollywood's audience base or the nation in which we live?

In response to the outcry surrounding this year's Oscar nominations, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, the first African American and third female president of the Academy, spoke to the Associated Press and pointed to progress in the Academy's efforts to reflect our nation's diverse, movie-going audience.

She noted, "In the last two years, we've made greater strides than we ever have in the past toward becoming a more diverse and inclu-

sive organization through admitting new members and more inclusive classes of members," adding, "I would love to see and look forward to see a greater cultural diversity among all our nominees in all of our categories."

I share her vision, but the question remains of when those words will be put into a plan of action — and championed by the broader industry.

A much-cited 2012 survey of the Academy by the Los Angeles Times demonstrates the crux of the problem. According to the survey, the estimated 7,000 Academy members are 94 percent white, 77 percent male and have a median age of 62 — hardly a representative reflection of the nation.

While my role is not to question the film credentials of the Academy's members, I do question the ability of such a homogenous body to reflect the perspectives, lives, and stories of a diverse pool of filmmakers — and moviegoers. I would also question the ability of the Academy to monitor itself and become a more inclusive body without the pressure of public scrutiny and advocacy.

Here are a few things to note

about Academy membership: membership is "limited to film artists working in the production of theatrically-released motion pictures... The Academy's membership process is by sponsorship, not application. Candidates must be sponsored by two Academy members from the branch to which the candidate seeks admission. Additionally, Academy Award nominees are automatically considered for membership and do not require sponsors... The Board decides which individuals will receive invitations."

The Academy's membership requirements are both an indictment and call to action. When women and minorities are snubbed at the Oscars, it means much more than wounded gender or ethnic pride. It means that we, as a nation, have lost an opportunity to reflect our unique diversity via a medium that touches so many of our lives. It means we have lost another seat at the proverbial Oscar table.

This is about more than awards deferred; it is about dreams deferred. It is about the lack of racial and gender diversity we find both behind the screen and in front of it. It is about the inevitable way

the Academy's membership roll directly influences who gets nominated and who wins.

What it is not about is an unfair advantage, but instead, a fair chance to have the work of a wider swath of our filmmakers, casts and crews considered. That must begin with a significant change in the composition of the Academy.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the strides the Academy has begun to make to address its diversity issues. Hiring Boone Isaacs as its president was an important step on the road to diversifying, and her decision to remove a cap on the number of Academy members and push for Academy members to invite a more diverse pool of people to apply are the first of many important steps that must be taken on the journey towards inclusion. But more must be done.

Progress rarely comes as a result of being passive. I urge you to join me in efforts to ensure more inclusion in Hollywood so that we can look back on the 2015 Oscars as the catalyst that spurred action for much-needed industry reform.

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Modern-day Slavery at the Hands of Human Traffickers

The fight for freedom for everyone

BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO

President Barack Obama recently issued a Presidential Proclamation declaring January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month. The president further called for an annual celebration of National Freedom Day on Feb. 1. We might think that is a strange declaration since we are privileged to live our daily lives in the land of the free and home of the brave. If only it were true for everyone.

People in this country and around the world are held against their will and coerced into many forms of violence and bondage, ranging from forced prostitution to domestic servitude. Globally, more than 20 million people are subjected to modern-day slavery at the hands of human traffickers. Tragically, six million of these are children and 55



percent are women and girls. Next to drug trafficking, it is the second most profitable business in the world, worth \$150 billion.

We may have the impression that this form of modern-day slavery is happening outside our borders, somewhere else. However, it is right here in cities and communities across our nation.

Exact data is not known because this crime against humanity operates underground, but it is estimated that since 2007, more than 85,000 people cried out for help to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline (888-373-7888). Calls are now coming in with rising frequency because of the concerted effort to make the hotline number available in many venues of our communities.

In the year 2000, the United States Department of State established an office to monitor and combat trafficking of persons. They partner with foreign governments, international organizations, and local community members to collaborate in the establishment of policies that protect victims, prosecute traffickers, and prevent trafficking from happening in the first place. Our

government, along with international partners, is taking this issue very seriously, but they need our help.

And whether we know it or not, we play a part in perpetuating this injustice. We want to buy our products at a cheap price, but they can come at a major cost to children around the world.

Forced labor is happening in factories producing many of the products we enjoy every day. The food, clothing, electronic equipment, cosmetics, and jewelry we use every day could have been produced by someone forced into cheap labor.

Even the coffee we drink, the fish we eat, or the chocolate we have for dessert may have been provided by those living in modern-day slavery. Here in our own back yard, women and children are imprisoned by traffickers to be sex workers through escort services, hotels, and strip joints.

The United Church of Christ joined with other communities of faith to observe Jan. 11 as Human Trafficking Awareness Sunday. We applaud the historic action, led by Pope Francis, who gathered a pow-

erful group of faith leaders at the Vatican on Dec. 3, pledging to end modern-day slavery by calling people all over the world to action.

You can join this effort by signing the Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Modern Slavery by visiting the website

globalfreedomnetwork.org/declaration.

Help the worldwide commitment to end modern-day slavery.

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