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OPINION

Beating the Odds and Making a Difference

Welcome to the land of opportunity

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

My mother always said, ‘Learn what you can learn for yourself, and then share your knowledge with others.’ My goal now is to advocate for equality and help others in need. Perhaps I have this opportunity because the purpose of my life has been to open the door for others.”

At a time when the national conversation is focused on building walls and closing doors against immigrants, Carlos is an immigrant with another goal. He’s setting an example of what’s possible when hard-working smart young people come to America determined to beat the odds and make a difference. Carlos was born in the mountains of Guatemala. As a young child he was fasci-



nated by nature and remembers climbing every tree he could to get a better glimpse of the birds and animals around him – but that kind of freedom didn’t last long. At an age when American preschoolers get ready to start kindergarten, Carlos went to work.

At first he did what he could to help his mother as she cleaned houses. He never knew his father, and his mother couldn’t afford any of the fees for the uniforms or pens and pencils and other supplies required for Carlos to attend school. After a few years Carlos earned money by chopping wood or doing small carpentry jobs. He started leaving home where work was scarce to work in other parts of his country. He was away working when a boss called him over to tell Carlos his mother had died. Carlos was 15 and completely on his own.

The musical cultural sensation Hamilton famously retells the story of the founding fa-

ther who started off in similar circumstances: abandoned by his father, forced to work at a young age, and suddenly orphaned, poor, and all alone. Carlos, too, realized his hope for survival lay with starting over in America – still the land

D.C. with his sponsors, and for the first time in his life was allowed to go to school.

Carlos was now 17 and determined to make the most of this American dream. He never imagined he might be able to go to college, but slowly he

a degree in engineering. He’s also the recipient of a Children’s Defense Fund Beat the Odds scholarship.

Carlos’s story is part of America’s long tradition of welcoming immigrants and letting them use their talents

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of opportunity in his eyes where even an “orphan immigrant” could have a chance. For Carlos this meant an arduous 2,000 mile journey – most of it walking – figuring out his way as he went. He arrived in the United States with an empty stomach and swollen, bruised feet. His relief at making it to America as an unaccompanied minor was matched by his astonishment when he moved to Washington,

was able to expand his horizons: “At first my goal was to work, but then that changed to graduate school . . . Now my goal is to become an engineer.”

He’s already on his way. Despite how far behind he was when he first stepped into a classroom, Carlos was able to graduate from high school in three years and began attending George Washington University last summer to pursue

to shine and contribute here – a tradition that’s shaped our nation since its founding. The Statue of Liberty still proudly stands in New York harbor representing freedom from oppression and tyranny: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children’s Defense Fund.

Consigning a Present-Day Monument to the Past

A racial reckoning at Yale

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Don’t allow anyone to tell you differently. Symbols matter. Whether these symbols are flags, icons or names on buildings, symbols are shorthand and they stand in for those core values we reject—and those we accept.

After years of outcry, protests, and an act of glass-shattering vandalism, Yale University has recently announced that the name of the residential college commemorating John C. Calhoun will be changed.

Calhoun, a Yale alumnus, served our nation as its seventh vice president, its 16th secretary of state, its 10th secretary of war, and as a senator representing South Carolina. But his service to our country—his legacy—is overshadowed by his fierce defense of the indefensible



institution of slavery. Calhoun, a self-described white supremacist, was a slaveholder and an ardent supporter of slavery. During his 1837 senate address, he publicly hailed the institution as a “positive good.”

Erected in 1933, the college that has borne the name and the heavy symbolic weight of Calhoun’s name for 86 years will be renamed for Grace Murray Hopper, a computer science pioneer and Navy rear admiral, who received her master’s degree and doctorate from Yale.

But, changing the name of the Calhoun College was never a foregone conclusion. As recently as last spring, Yale President Peter Salovey maintained that, despite the din of protest, the university would keep Calhoun’s name. In a campus-wide email to students, he wrote:

“Ours is a nation that continues to refuse to face its own history of slavery and racism. Yale is part of this history, as exemplified by the decision to recognize an ardent defender of slavery by

naming a college for him. Erasing Calhoun’s name from a much-loved residential college risks masking this past, downplaying the lasting effects of slavery, and substituting a false and misleading narrative, albeit one that might allow us to feel complacent or, even, self-congratulatory. Retaining the name forces us to learn anew and confront one of the most disturbing aspects of Yale’s and our nation’s past. I believe this is our obligation as an educational institution.”

But rather than create an atmosphere of reconciliation and soul searching, the public sanction of symbols of division and hatred often energizes and justifies its adherents, while arousing alienation and resentment in its opponents. How can we appeal to our better angels, when everyday we are greeted by the demons of our past?

Corey Menafee, a cafeteria worker at Yale, also made his feelings known about the building and the racially-charged stained glass panels that adorned the college featuring idealized images of slavery, which, at one

point, included a stained-glass window depicting a shackled black man kneeling before Calhoun (the kneeling black man was later taken out of the picture). With the poke of a broomstick, Menafee knocked down and shattered a racially-charged glass panel in the dining hall that depicted two slaves, a man and a woman, carrying bales of cotton on their heads. His reasoning was simple, saying, “It’s 2016, I shouldn’t have to come to work and see things like that.”

Menafee’s action, campus protests, and the racial reckoning taking place across many American college campuses at that time, and on the streets of communities that were fed up with wages of police brutality and the insults of judicial indifference, played a significant role in revisiting the controversy over Calhoun’s name. In the end, Yale did the right thing, with the president noting in a statement to students, “The decision to change a college’s name is not one we take lightly, but John C. Calhoun’s legacy as a white supremacist

and a national leader who passionately promoted slavery as a “positive good” fundamentally conflicts with Yale’s mission and values.”

While I applaud Yale’s change of heart, I want to encourage the university to “confront one of the most disturbing aspects of Yale’s and our nation’s past,” not only by unshackling itself from its reprehensible symbols, but by addressing slavery’s legacy of racial inequality and committing to increasing the diversity of its student body and faculty.

According to the New York Times, the university has promised to invest \$50 million in a faculty-diversity initiative to address the fact that less than three percent of Yale’s arts and sciences faculty is black. And of Yale’s close to 5,400 undergraduate students, only 11 percent identify themselves as African American.

While a battle has been scored, the war to commit to inclusion still remains to be won.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.