

CNN Presents: Caucasian in America

By Ruth O'Neill

Demographics in this country are changing faster than ketchup became salsa. Based on findings from the 2000 census, 75 percent of people living in the United States in 2090 will be people of color. But we need not gaze into a crystal ball to see the dramatic shifts already occurring in our nation's demographics. When our current high school seniors come face to face with their college classmates next fall, 33 percent of those faces may not be Caucasian. When current pre-kindergarten children meet their college roommates, that number will top 40 percent.

These numbers are not news to Head of School John Gulla, the Board of Trustees or to Blake's Center for Diversity Director Donna Albro. For a number of years now the School's mission statement has included in it the goal of educating students to be culturally competent global citizens. "At this School we define cultural competence as 'the will and ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences,'" says Albro. "In order to teach students to be citizens of the world, we must continue to grow to become a more diverse and vibrant community. We must continue to recruit a diverse group of students, faculty members and administrators because every adult in our community is a mentor who will influence and shape the mindsets of our children and how they see the world."

By "diverse" Albro means far more than just racial inclusion. Here at Blake diversity includes ethnicity, national origin, geography, religion, gender, affectional or sexual orientation, age, physical ability, and marital, parental or economic status. "We will have failed our students if we do not teach them how to move through the world as responsible, compassionate and action-oriented citizens of the world," says Albro. "It is our hope and goal that Blake graduates be both willing and able to interact with classmates, teachers, employers and neighbors whose life experiences are entirely different than their own."

This year students at every campus will have the pleasure of working with Albro and a host of other adults who will help them to develop a greater self-awareness, a better sensitivity toward all people, and a more complete understanding of why embracing pluralism is so connected to excellence in education. Albro and Lower School Director Barry Wadsworth are working with parents of more than 26 young students of color to explore ways to enhance and expand the social experiences of all students and their parents in this community. Middle School students are exploring cultural competency with Albro and Heather Jackson from LearningWorks during their health and wellness classes, and all freshmen at the Upper School are taking a class called Perspectives on Pluralism, or POP.

One particular exercise Albro employs in POP is to have students keep a running list of words that may not seem offensive at first, but on closer examination might in fact show incredible ignorance and insensitivity. "Lame," "crazy" and "moron" at first blush may have been believed to be casual, harmless terms, but what if you are talking to a professor who has a physical disability, or joking around with a roommate whose mother has a mental illness, or watching a football game with a neighbor whose twin brother lives in an institution due to a mental disability? Whoops! Your ignorance is showing! You are probably risking more than just being politically incorrect or hurting someone's feelings. You also may be missing out on the opportunity to connect with another human being and to learn



Dr. Carlos Cortes, author of several well-known books on diversity and the creative and cultural advisor for Nickelodeon's "Dora the Explorer" and "Go, Diego, Go!," led a faculty workshop this past summer at Blake (pictured above) and will return to Blake Feb. 22-26 to meet the Blake community and be featured as the School's 18th annual diversity symposium speaker on Feb. 23.

something new. Perhaps you just alienated someone who could have been a colleague, a friend, a business partner — or your new boss.

Many adults over 40 years of age never dreamed that in their lifetime an African American would be elected president of the United States. "For kids today having a leader who looks like President Barack Obama is already their normal," says Albro. "Psychic underpinnings like this greatly influence how today's kids think and act. This can create a vast gap between the cultural mindsets of children and their parents. Our historical past is so different than what our children's will be, which is why parent education must continue to be a significant component of our pluralism plan."

To illustrate her point, Albro encourages parents to do an online web search of the demographics of their college alma mater. She also suggests visiting the web sites of the colleges and universities your child might be interested in to see exact percentages of students of color attending: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 13%; Carelton College, 23%; University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, 28%; Dartmouth, 34%; Yale, 37%; and Stanford, 55%. "If our students do not develop a full sense of cultural competence and an ability to move in and through their college years and the 21st century, they will be at a severe disadvantage."

So get ready for the future! We invite you to attend Blake's 18th Annual Diversity Symposium. Come hear acclaimed author and our featured speaker Dr. Carlos Cortes on Tuesday, Feb. 23. Dr. Cortes is the author of several well-known books on diversity including "The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach about Diversity" and "Backing into the Future: Opportunities and Challenges of our Multicultural 21st Century." He also is a creative and cultural advisor for Nickelodeon's Peabody-award-winning children's television series "Dora the Explorer" and its sequel, "Go, Diego, Go!" Dr. Cortes, who led a faculty workshop this summer at Blake, returns to the School Feb. 22-26 to meet with students, faculty, administrators, parents and members of the greater Blake community. Mark this event on your calendar now! For questions please contact Donna Albro or go to blakeschool.org/program_services/diversity.aspx.