



Diversity Gazette

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So, where are you from?

by Maureen Berner

Ok, I am a data nerd, but this one statistic really struck me recently. In January, Carolina Demography reported that 49% of adults in North Carolina were born in another state. I believe *the majority of working-age adults in NC were not born here*. I am one of these. And my experience with diversity is not the same as those who are native North Carolinians.

This picture is from Abraham Lincoln High School in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1985, my graduation year. It is from the German Club. We had a lot of members. It is a very white picture. It was a very white school, white town, white county, white state. Out of 1,200 students, there was one black family, the Mitchells. I don't remember *any* Asian, Middle-eastern, or Hispanic students. Diversity was defined, if at all, in religious terms – as in which Catholic Church you attended, St. Patrick's or St. Peter's. I did not knowingly meet a Jewish person until I was 21, and then

only because of the yarmulke. I was floored – I remember the moment clearly – Dan, my colleague in student government, was Jewish! Whoa! Cool!

Discrimination was an abstract and far-away concept, defined in the context of Apartheid in South Africa, the hot political issue on my very white campus at the University of Iowa. For most lowans, thinking about promoting diversity just wasn't important because it didn't exist materially in our day-to-day world (women's rights were not on the radar either). Discrimination was 'solved' with the civil rights movements of the 1960s.

How does my complete ignorance when I was young relate to diversity here, today? Many of the people we serve grew up somewhere else. They don't have the shared experience of growing up in North Carolina. Some have a deep understanding of discrimination; some, like me,

may have grown up in a bubble. Their ideas about diversity are, in part, products of their personal history. They are from Florida, California, Virginia and New York (the states with the greatest in-migration to NC). Their lived experience is very different from mine, or yours. Our work is about North Carolina, and a lot of our clients are steeped in North Carolina culture and history. As we look to do more around diversity in our work, please remember there are a growing number of folks who are new, and don't know the right way to pronounce Robeson County, or Pottawattamie County (my home county) – folks will make mistakes. And that's ok. We'll all learn together.

