

# Healing America: A Funder's Commitment to Racial Equity

By Dr. Gail C. Christopher, DN

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched an aggressive initiative in the late 80s through the early 90s to increase adoption rates and help communities find permanent homes for vulnerable children in the child welfare system. The program was a success. Thousands of children found permanent, loving families. The work may have helped to shape related national and state policies and practices, but when re-examined through a racial lens, it is clear that the program failed children of color. Despite their overrepresentation in the foster care system, embarrassingly few children of color were adopted. The lesson here is now clear: without a clear intention, coupled with creative strategies to influence perceptions as well as unconscious racial biases and structures of opportunity, disparities and achievement gaps will not be closed. Celebrating diversity and managing with an inclusive or multicultural lens are not enough. Racial privilege and opportunity structures invade every policy and social system in this nation, including health care, corporations, education, justice, food systems, media and child welfare.

The vision that guides the work of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation is clear: we envision a nation that marshals its resources to assure that all children thrive. What may be less self-evident to some is the pernicious and self-perpetuating way in which racism impedes many children's opportunities to do so.

Today, a number of factors — mass incarceration rates among young males



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of color, persistent residential racial segregation, concentrated poverty, school failure and extreme unemployment within a disproportionate number of communities of color — are combining to create a blatant racial/social caste system in the United States. Left uncorrected, future generations of children will face insurmountable barriers to equal opportunity. Instead of *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one), current social and economic data forecast that we will become a nation in which the many are increasingly separated from the few by a chasm of inequality.

The divide is based largely on superficial physical characteristics that have been and continue to be used in a misguided effort to categorize individuals according to race. But while scientific evidence clearly establishes that racial categories are an artificial construct, the social consequences of racism are real, profound and profoundly far-reaching. In a nation in which many profess to be color-blind, more than half of all black, brown, African American, Latino (Hispanic), and Native American children live in low income families today. Worse, far too

many of these families face the double jeopardy of being trapped within low income neighborhoods. Comparing demographic patterns in the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas, Harvard scholars Delores Acevedo Garcia and David Williams found that more than one in five Latino children (20.5 percent) live in both poor families and poor neighborhoods. About one in six (16.8 percent) African American children face the same dilemma. For white children, the number is just over one in a hundred (1.2 percent).

In declaring his mandate for the Kellogg Foundation — “Do what you will with the money, so long as it helps children” — Will Keith Kellogg was color-blind. Indeed, he recognized that poverty itself makes children vulnerable. That is why, as a largely white nation, based on sheer numbers, most poor children in the United States are white. And that is why the W.K. Kellogg Foundation funds and supports groups that help all children.

But when it looked beyond headcount, to the stark contrast in the opportunities for success faced by the various racial groups in this country, the foundation's board of directors found it impossible to ignore the consequences of entrenched racial bias and structural racism. Thanks to the unprecedented combination of higher birth rates and immigration patterns of the last several decades, demographic trends show that by the year 2013, most of the children in this country will be children of color. The board recog-

nized that under such conditions, racially-based and perpetuated poverty and obstacles to success are not merely social ills but measurable threats to our nation's economic viability and security. Succeeding as a nation in an increasingly competitive world requires that we leverage and maximize *all* of our resources effectively. We cannot do that, nor can we expect our military or our social security system to function properly, if most of our children and youth are undereducated or unemployed. That makes identifying and removing racial barriers to equal opportunities the single most significant human challenge facing our nation in this century.

Addressing that challenge, and doing so effectively, requires that, collectively, we heal the nation's legacy of racism.

While the human genome project has heralded the new era of genomic science and medicine, it also has dispelled the myth of biological racial difference. The scientific evidence is unambiguous: all of humanity is descended from a common set of ancestors, making all of us members of a single, global family. Superficial physical characteristics of pigmentation, facial structure and/or hair texture all are adaptations to the environments and climates in which our ancestors evolved. At the most basic level, the level of the genome — the information that drives cellular reproduction and life processes — we all are 99.9 percent the same.

Yet, while science has utterly discredited the myth of biological racial difference, the centuries-old opportunity structure that doles out privilege based on that mythology is solidly embedded in our culture. So solidly, in fact, that its roots and branches touch our institutions and modes of thinking in ways of which we may not even be conscious. As Peggy McIntosh demon-

strated in her now-classic article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," the field of philanthropy itself, for example, is largely the result of that system of racial mythology. Access to privilege and its attendant systems of opportunity helped to create the white-owned fortunes that generated our nation's largest philanthropies. Today, shame over past wrongs and Herculean efforts to undo the consequences of our collective ignorance about race (including the Civil War and the civil rights movement) move us to call for a color-blind society. It just feels better to turn away from history and assert that the past is over. There is an understandable and very human need to "declare victory" and put issues of race behind us. After all, we have our first African American president. Isn't that the clearest evidence imaginable that we now are living in a post-racial America?

The reality is that we are not. It is undeniably true that much progress has been made, and that we are not as racially divided as we once were. But it is equally and demonstrably true that

enormous and disproportionate obstacles face an overwhelming number of families and children of color. Consider:

- Among developed nations, the USA has one of the greatest income disparities and highest levels of racial and economic neighborhood segregation. Among OECD member nations, only Turkey and Mexico have higher levels of income disparity.
- Although the majority of illegal drug users and dealers nationwide are white, three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug offenses have been black or Latino. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington D.C., our nation's capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in poor neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across the nation.
- More than 50 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, America's public schools are more segregated now

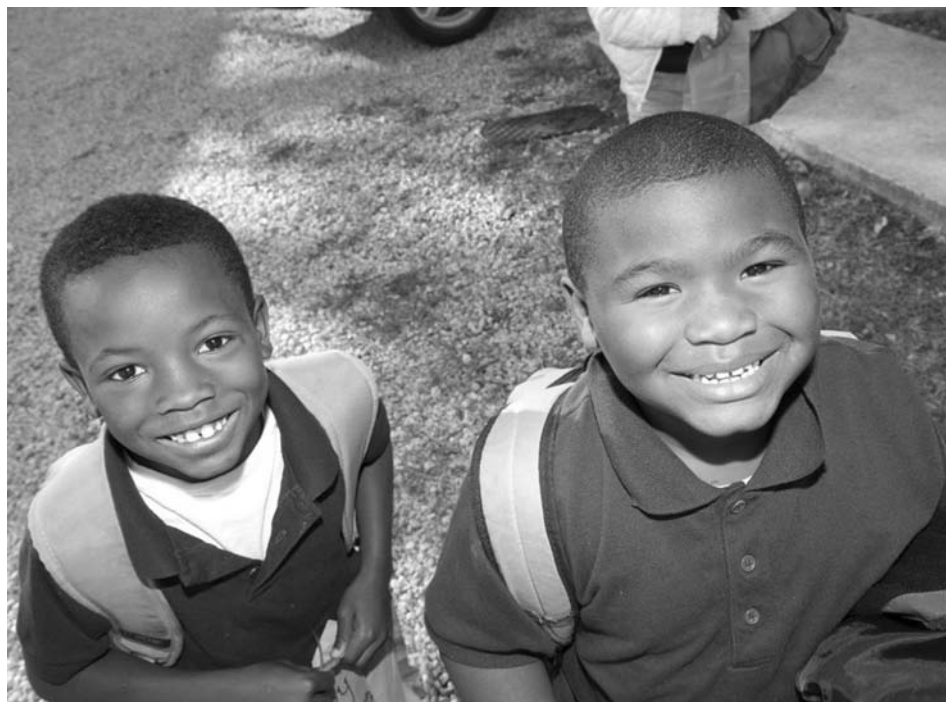


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than they were in the 1960s.

- People of color and poor people live with more pollution than the rest of this nation. For example, African Americans are 79 percent more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where industrial pollution is suspected of posing the greatest health danger.
- Communities of color continue to carry a disproportionate burden of racial disparities in infant mortality, childhood obesity, diabetes and adolescent deaths due to gun violence and homicide.

Clearly, we are not living in a post-racial America, nor can we afford the ignorance (and arrogance) of behaving as if we are color-blind. Our racialized social and opportunity structures have generated and continue to generate two consistent outcomes: privilege for some, and obstacles, pain and suffering for others. Where there is suffering, emotional and physical healing is required.

And that healing demands that we see — more clearly than ever before — that the racial social structure so engrained in our national ethos is no longer feasible. We must move beyond denial to face the consequences, implications and feelings — including, for many, extreme discomfort — that accompany the hard work of acknowledging the painful experiences and the destructive impact associated with our national, individual and group racial wounds.

This is the beginning of the healing process, and it reflects the thinking behind the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's request for proposals for community-based racial healing efforts. We received almost 1,000 proposals from every state in America — except Wyoming — with healing strategies as diverse as rewriting local school history curricula, including the positive contribution of Native Americans, to training district attorneys in the central role of racism in historic and contemporary legal practices. Community-based

racial healing efforts can include:

- Community-based efforts to mitigate the effects of discrimination and structural racism through sustained coalitions and/or multi-sector partnerships with clearly stated goals and projected outcomes that affect the lives of marginalized children.
- Working to eliminate institutional and structural racism through awareness, education, information dissemination and creative approaches to media.
- Community asset/opportunity assessment or mapping strategies.
- Dialogues, training and learning experiences for healing across racial groups and within racial/ethnic groups.
- Local history narratives and/or exhibits related to racial history.
- Race-relations and human rights education and assistance projects.
- Outreach, media and communication efforts on racial issues.
- School and organizational curricular projects.
- Local regulatory or policy initiatives such as school reform health, disparities or citizen engagement efforts.

The \$75 million, five-year “America Healing” initiative complements larger bodies of work within the foundation, focusing on education; food, health and well-being; and family economic security. The foundation distributes approximately \$300 million each year on behalf of vulnerable children and families. Experience has taught us that unless we are explicit about healing (within communities and individuals) the scars of centuries of racialized privilege and opportunity, our broader funding strategies will fail to close achievement gaps or eliminate racial disparities. The sustained motivation and commitment necessary to change social and opportunity systems and the dynamics of power in the United States require deep understanding, compas-

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sion and will to change. This happens only when the vision and intention are clear. Then, perceptions, hearts and minds can and often do change. In mandating that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation become an effective antiracist organization, the foundation's board of trustees acknowledged both the implicit benefits of white privilege and the foundation's obligation to be responsive to the needs produced by centuries of structural racism.

This is why we are making the largest single initiative investment in the foundation's history in supporting what we hope will be a catalytic effort. America needs to heal. Healing may be described operationally as the personal experience of the transcendence of suffering. Structural privilege and attendant social injustice has produced immeasurable pain and suffering, which remain both silent and invisible. We must have the courage to see this and to address it. Healing also has been defined as "the process of bringing together aspects of one's self, body,

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mind-spirit at deeper levels of inner knowing, leading toward integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value" (Dossey

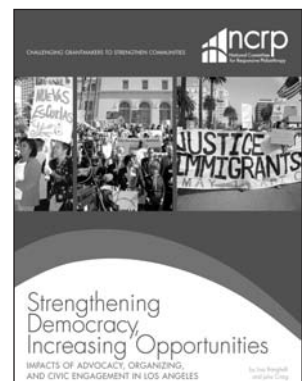
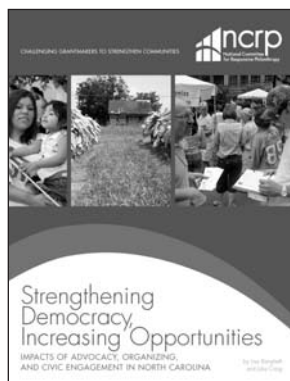
et al., 2005). While this definition refers to the individual or personal level of experience, when it comes to issues of racial reconciliation and healing, it can be expanded to the community and, we hope, ultimately to the national level.

Our mission statement calls for us to support "children, families, and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society." We believe that healed communities in which individuals see one another as connected, as part of a whole — working on behalf of *all* children — will be strong catalysts for doing exactly that. ■

*Dr. Gail C. Christopher, DN is vice president for programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. To read more about W.K. Kellogg Foundation's America Healing initiative, please visit [www.america-healing.org](http://www.america-healing.org).*

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