



75 of 250 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 2004 The Baltimore Sun Company
All Rights Reserved
The Baltimore Sun

April 18, 2004 Sunday FINAL Edition

SECTION: PERSPECTIVE, Pg. 1C

LENGTH: 1567 words

HEADLINE: Living and learning in black and white;

Success: Freeman A. Hrabowski, president of UMBC, grew up in Birmingham, Ala., where whites resisted integration with deadly consequences.

BYLINE: Michael Hill

SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

Freeman A. Hrabowski III helped mark many civil rights milestones in education last year - the 40th anniversaries of blacks at Clemson University in South Carolina and in the medical school of Duke University, and the 35th anniversary of the integration of Vanderbilt University medical school.

Next month will be the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education. Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, started first grade in segregated Birmingham, Ala., schools the year that the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional.

"They told us not to take the brown paper covers off our books," he said at a symposium at UMBC last week marking that 50th anniversary.

"But I did. I saw the stamp that said they came from the white school. My teacher told me, 'The book may be second-rate, but you aren't.' "

Hrabowski - who will deliver the school's Low Lecture on the Brown decision May 5 - was extraordinary by any standard. He was only 4 years old when he started first grade, 15 when he went to college. He grew up in Birmingham as it became a cauldron for the turmoil of the civil rights movement that would galvanize the nation.

Despite the Brown decision, his education was segregated through college. But the court decision was a promise dangled before the black community that nurtured him. Everyone knew change was coming, that - for better or worse - the world Hrabowski would encounter was going to be different from the one his parents had endured.

Education was of prime importance in the Hrabowski household. His mother was a teacher specializing in math and English for eighth-graders. His father started as a teacher but found he could make more money as a laborer in

Living and learning in black and white; Success: Freeman A. Hrabowski, president of UMBC, grew up in Birmingham, Ala., where whites resisted integration with deadly consequences. The Baltimore Sun Apr

Birmingham's steel mills. He worked two other railroad jobs. And he made extra money reading, writing and doing math for the illiterate whites who were often his supervisors.

A year after young Hrabowski started school, Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of a Birmingham bus. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in town. The movement was beginning.

"My parents were always going to meetings of something called the Alabama Christian Movement," he says. "They would take me with them. I would be sitting in the back, doing my math problems, reading a book."

Hrabowski was raised in a remarkable community. He can tick off the doctors, lawyers, business leaders, university presidents and many Ph.D.s that came out of his neighborhood. Among his parents' friends was another family of educators, the Rices. Their daughter, four years younger than Hrabowski, earned a Ph.D. in political science and became provost of Stanford University. Condoleezza Rice is now President Bush's National Security Advisor.

"I'll tell you someone else from Birmingham," Hrabowski says. "Alma Vivien. That's what we called her. She's married to Colin Powell. Her uncle was principal of my high school. He would always stop me in the hallway and give me a math problem to see if I could do them."

In the same school where Hrabowski's mother taught eighth grade, the mother of Angela Davis taught fourth. Davis studied philosophy with Herman Marcuse and became a radical black activist in the 1960s. Six years older than Freeman Hrabowski, Davis left Birmingham to attend an integrated high school in New York under a program run by the American Friends, a nonprofit Quaker group.

"My parents decided not to do that with me," Hrabowski says. But they sent him to Massachusetts in the summers during high school to live with a godparent and attend school. "They wanted me to get used to an integrated setting."

Hrabowski was not among the black students who integrated Birmingham's schools in the early 1960s. "They were treated terribly, spit at, had bottles thrown at them. My parents did not want me to go through that," he says. They kept him in a segregated school.

Leadership

There were few places where the defenders of segregation fought as fiercely as in Birmingham.

Hrabowski knew the four girls who died in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. He remembers learning that a hand of the girl he knew the best, Denise McNair, was blown off and identified by a ring her father had given her. "I had nightmares about that for years."

As he left school to go to the funeral of the girls, Hrabowski says he was stopped by his principal, Alma Powell's father. "He saw I had on a bright-colored tie and he said, 'Son, you can't go to a funeral with that tie,' and he knelt down and literally took his tie off and tied it on me.

"The whole time, he was talking to me about the significance of what I was doing ... how I was representing the other students and parents (who couldn't attend), and Alma, and your race.

"It was not just a casual moment. As he tied that tie, he was teaching me about leadership."

King's protests were losing steam because so many demonstrators were in jail. A controversial call went out for children to join the protest and fill the jails. Twelve-year-old Hrabowski wanted to go.

"My parents didn't want me to," he says. "Nobody in our neighborhood wanted their children to. This was a middle-class neighborhood. Education was important."

Hrabowski says his parents discussed the issue. "They came and woke me up and told me I could go," he says. "I

Living and learning in black and white; Success: Freeman A. Hrabowski, president of UMBC, grew up in Birmingham, Ala., where whites resisted integration with deadly consequences. The Baltimore Sun Apr

was scared. I had seen the pictures on television, of the children being bitten by those dogs, leveled by those fire hoses. But, of course, I couldn't back out then."

Hrabowski was sent to jail for "five horrible days."

"They put us in with the bad kids," he says. "But there was one of them that my mother had taught. He asked if I was 'Miss Hrabowski's kid?' He protected me. I was teaching him to read, late at night, from the Bible.

"I spoke at his funeral about a year later. He was killed in a knife fight. It wasn't guns back then; it was knives."

The Birmingham school board ordered the suspension of all the arrested students. A federal judge overturned the suspensions.

"We were at a meeting of the Alabama Christian Movement, praying for the children who were suspended, when the word came that the judge had made that decision," Hrabowski remembers. "It was a very, very emotional statement. The kids just cried because a federal judge was saying we were not wrong."

Different experience

Hrabowski entered Hampton University in 1966. He chose a black college because of those summers in Massachusetts.

"I had such a negative social experience there," he says. "People just looked right through me. I didn't want to spend four years being ignored, made to feel so insignificant."

But his experience was different at Hampton. "I met white professors who looked at me and saw me and acknowledged me as a person who existed, a hard worker who had something to offer."

Graduate school in mathematics at the University of Illinois was Hrabowski's first full-time encounter with an overwhelmingly white world.

"I was the only black in my classes. I couldn't get into any of the groups," Hrabowski says. He remembers getting a test back from a professor. "He told me, 'You did surprisingly well,' " he says, still a bit bitter at the memory. "You can't blame him. He had never seen a black person who was good at math before."

Hrabowski returned to work at a black college, Alabama A&M, for a year, coming to Baltimore in 1977 as a dean at Coppin State College.

"I learned so much about how strong the students there were, in many cases women returning to school, rearing children, excited about learning, facing challenges most of us never imagine," he says of Coppin. "I saw how that college transformed lives."

Hrabowski has been at UMBC since 1987, president since 1992. It has become known for turning out top minority students, sending many to the most challenging graduate programs in the country. Its Meyerhoff scholarships encourage minority participation in the sciences.

"How rare is it, coming from my background in the deep South and meeting Bob and Jane Meyerhoff from very different backgrounds here in Baltimore ... truly believing that all children can succeed."

Hrabowski recognizes that the end of segregation that began with the Brown decision broke up communities of the type that nurtured him. Being a teacher was no longer the pinnacle of success. With desegregation, other professions - and neighborhoods - opened up to successful blacks and lured them from poorer communities.

"A black child (in a poor neighborhood) was much more likely to see hard-working and educated blacks going to

Living and learning in black and white; Success: Freeman A. Hrabowski, president of UMBC, grew up in Birmingham, Ala., where whites resisted integration with deadly consequences. The Baltimore Sun Apr

work every day years ago than is necessarily the case now," he says. "One has to be a member of an advantaged family to see that now."

But he hopes that UMBC can be one of the places where the world envisioned by Brown can become reality. "I think when you come to our campus, you can see people mixing, studying, laughing, all with the context of working to be better in a learning environment."

Hrabowski says he learned the essential lesson long ago in Birmingham. "If you give the students the support they need and have high expectations of them, they can succeed," he says. "None of us can ever escape our childhoods."

Coming May 16 in Perspective

Brown vs. Board of Education: A special section. Fifty years after the Supreme Court's historic ruling against segregated schools, The Sun looks at how schools and society have fared.

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), 1. Freeman A. Hrabowski III grew up in Birmingham, Ala., attending segregated schools until college.; 2. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of UMBC, will deliver the school's Low Lecture on the Brown vs. Board decision May 5.; 1. SUN STAFF : 2003; 2. SUN STAFF 2002

LOAD-DATE: April 20, 2004