

WHY AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IS IMPORTANT: AN EXETER STORY | By Benjamin Davis '73



Benjamin Davis '73

In January of this year, I spent a weekend in San Francisco visiting my friend of 36 years, Andy Davidson. Andy and I went to Phillips Exeter Academy between 1970 and 1973. We were roommates in Installment Hall (as Ewald dorm was then known) and were the tightest of friends. He was the best man at my wedding and I was the best man at his.

When I mentioned the trip to my sister, Dorothy Davis, she told me a story that I had never heard before. Back in the early to mid-1980s, she was a sales representative for *Fortune* magazine, working out of Philadelphia. At that time, Andy's dad, Ralph Davidson, was the chairman of the board of Time, Inc., the parent company of *Fortune*. Whenever Dorothy was in New York, she had an open invitation from Ralph to drop by and say hello.

On one of the occasions in New York, she told Ralph about a sales call she had made for *Fortune* in upstate New York at a private golf club. She said that selling at the club was problematic for her, as women were not allowed out of the clubhouse to play golf and it was pretty clear no people of color were allowed to be members.

Soon thereafter, Time had a big meeting at a resort in Colorado for the global advertising and editorial staff of *Fortune*, and Ralph Davidson came out to speak and to rally the troops, accompanied by his other son, Will. There were five or six minority and/or female sales reps, including my sister, in the large dining room where the meeting was held.

Dorothy said hello to Ralph and then headed to her table. Will Davidson followed Dorothy and sat down next to her at her table, explaining that his father had asked him to do so. Ralph Davidson knew that in the corporate world, that would start the other sales reps fluttering.

During the meal, Ralph made a speech and at one point told the sales reps that it had come to his attention that Time employees had made sales calls at private clubs that discriminated on the basis of race, gender or religion. Henceforth, he said, Time would not pay for memberships in any club that did so.

His comments hit the room like a lightning bolt.

Dorothy believes that my long friendship with Andy was key to Ralph's taking that action. Andy and I had the chance to become friends because Phillips Exeter decided to truly integrate. I am certain I was a beneficiary of affirmative action in my admission to Exeter (my physics teacher, Mr. Brownell, would confirm I was not the sharpest pencil in the box), and I remained a beneficiary through Harvard College, Law School and Business School.

Cascading black students of promise down to lower-tier schools reduces the opportunities for these kinds of friendships, friendships that can change one life and—just as importantly—change *many* people's lives for the better. Black students benefit, yes, but so does our entire society.

Andy Davidson passed away in February from cancer. Yet his love continues to surround me, and the memory of our 36-year friendship helps to keep me strong. That friendship was a window into how equals treat each other. It was also the measure of how I am treated in other settings, a barometer that I find very helpful to have. I love him and know he loved me. It was something that went beyond social categories, but which only had a chance to happen because of a commitment to integration.

The work of affirmative action at all levels is not done yet. It will be obvious when that work is done. From what I can see, that will not be in my lifetime, nor that of my children. ●

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