

When I started writing this column, I had planned to include episodes from my past that would demonstrate my commitment to diversity and inclusion – the things I said and did over a span of 50 years. Then, my brother showed me his creative work (shown below) and thought better of it.

Brother Bob’s print (yes, he’s the white guy) gets a lot of comment from visitors to his gallery, most of whom, like you and I, are probably unsettled by the challenging caption. Most of what I’ve

tried to do to confront racism and discrimination has indeed been talk, but my brother and I grew up with a father who did more than talk. Bob Fleming Sr., a brilliant lawyer, took action to expand civil liberties and civil rights long before it was cool to do so.

Funny story. One of his civil liberty cases went all the way to the Supreme Court (and Time magazine) in the mid-1960s, where he presented his brief on freedom of access to birth control. Meanwhile, he was patriarch of a highly visible Catholic family with six kids. Leadership of the parish was not amused with his choice of clients!

Dad also fought administrators in failing city schools on behalf of minority kids and parents. He got hippies out of jail who had been arrested for American flags sewn on their frayed back pockets. He challenged city planners proposing highway routes through poor neighborhoods. And so on. He championed equality and fairness, even when it cost him friends and personal opportunities. Eventually, as Dean of a law school, he worked on inclusion in the faculty, student body and curriculum. And, he never felt that he did enough. Dad would drive my mother crazy because the visible push-back in our very white community often fell on her.

So, here we are half a century later and similar struggles remain. In this edition, and in a report commissioned by ACCE’s Diversity and Inclusion Working Group, the case is made for chambers of commerce and this association to do more than talk. It is not up to ACCE or me to preach what you “should” do. I don’t know what you can or should do in your particular geopolitical, economic, professional and personal circumstances. All ACCE can do is advise you that there is a strong case – a business case – for chambers to care about issues of diversity, equity and inclusion because they affect your communities and organizations.

Starting eighteen months ago, ACCE’s board of directors immersed itself in multiple discussions about racial, ethnic and other inclusion topics. As our board’s chairman noted elsewhere in this issue, that robust give-and-take led to a series of action

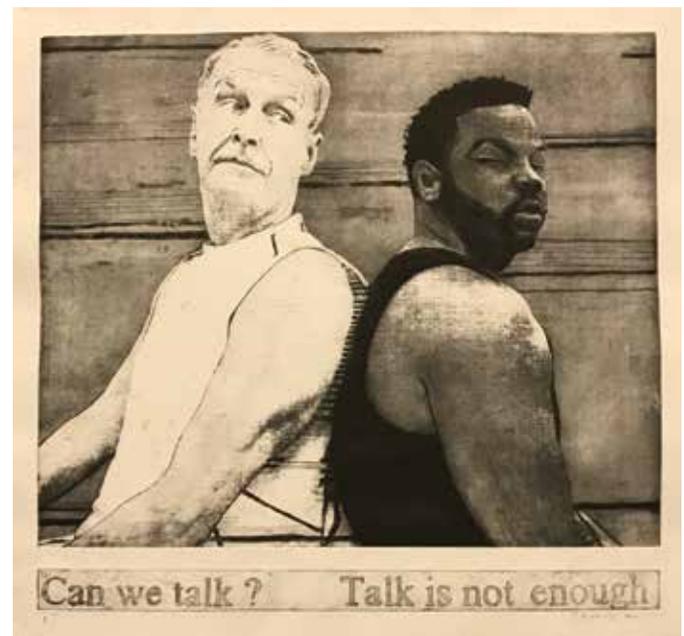
steps designed to meet our mission; a mission which includes helping you address changes affecting economies, programming and operations. We’re treating this much the way we addressed education and workforce challenges now faced by almost every chamber.

I freely admit that being raised in a liberal family and having in-laws, cousins, nieces, nephews, friends and employees of every color and persuasion, makes me take inclusiveness personally. Neither I, nor ACCE, however, are alone in thinking that D&I work is important for organizations like yours.

Our counterparts at the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) have found lack of diversity to be an *existential* problem for the future of many membership organizations. Consultants to the chamber-economic development profession, like Mac Holladay, CCE of Market Street Services, have been making the case for years that communities must address diversity, or the lack thereof, with the same energy they apply to talent shortages and transportation infrastructure. Even the fundraising firms serving the industry find these issues resonating with potential chamber investors. Scores of your peers are recognizing that diversity issues are *their* issues.

In short, you won’t be weird if you take a few steps down this road, but we understand why it can be daunting. It is to us, too!

When I first arrived at ACCE and tried to pull together folks to work on diversifying the membership and leadership of the organization and profession, I hit road blocks and dismissiveness. As recently as four years ago, the panelists



Limited edition print by Robert B. Fleming, Jr.

outnumbered the attendees at our one convention workshop on diversity topics. In Savannah last summer, multiple D&I-focused sessions were all full. Our D&I Division, launched in 2011, now includes hundreds of members who tackle workforce, workplace and marketplace diversity issues in their towns. The chamber industry has come a long way over the past 15 years.

ACCE is going to address these issues and offer practical suggestions based on what leading edge chambers are trying, both their victories and their stumbles. We now have grant funding to support this work, which will bring you additional tools and guidance. None of it will make sense, however, if you don't first question your own assumptions.

What do your demographic realities tell you about the potential for growth? How do young people, regardless of ethnicity, view your chamber? How are the politics in city or county hall influenced by various voting groups? Are you missing the ball on key decisions because your staff and board

all look and think like you? What challenges that you already face – from health care, to transportation, to homelessness – are impacted by the relative inclusiveness or separateness of people in your town?

Ask the questions, face the answers. Then make your own decision about whether and how to act. It's not our call; it's yours, but the Horizon Initiative, which has been embraced and endorsed by chamber executives and boards nationwide, compels us to do more than talk, if when and how we can. It is, after all, the definition of "onward."

Mick Fleming is president of ACCE.

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