

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Brandon Cosby

Greg Peters, California

Brandon Cosby is the new principal of Shortridge High School. For the last four years, Brandon has served as the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning's (CELL) Senior Fellow for high school transformation and worked directly with Indianapolis Public Schools on high school conversions. Brandon joined CELL after serving nine years in the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation, where he worked as a principal, assistant principal and high school teacher. Additionally, Brandon is an anti-racist activist and works in numerous communities and schools around the country. A New Castle, Indiana, native, Brandon is pursuing his Ed.D. in education administration at Oakland City University. He holds an M.A. in education administration from Oakland City University and a B.S. in speech communication and theatre teaching from the University of Indianapolis.

Brandon has two children: his son Zion (5) and his nephew Storm (17).

Who is Brandon Cosby?

I am a man who goes to work every day and tries to fix the system that I live in fear is going to claim my kids – when I say my kids, I mean my own boys.

What do you mean by “claim them”?

Kill them, incarcerate them, break their spirits, spoon-feed them self-hatred, inadequately educate them. The system does what it does very well, and it accomplishes that task in a number of ways.

What is “the system”?

The system is the institutional, racist bureaucracy that exists in every aspect – the political, the social, the educational institution – it is everywhere around us.

Lisa Delpit says the kind of racism we are battling is broken down into particles – it is in the air we breathe. We have to get to that level of specificity to fight it.

How do you try to fight it...to fix it?

By working myself into positions of power and influence and taking those bureaucratic processes



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off-line in hopes of putting different methods in place. When battling a machine, it comes down to taking it off-line, that is, interrupting it and putting something new in its place. Sometimes it means forcing the conversations.

How does this thinking – who you are – relate to your work within NSRF and its larger network of school reformers across the country?

Before my introduction to NSRF as a whole, this was work I was doing by myself. It was me in isolation with some ideas and some very strong feelings I had from my own experiences as a student. My work was as an advocate for students whom I saw having similar experiences. I was a lone wolf.

When I interviewed for Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) in Indianapolis, I was interviewed by Camilla Greene, Lois Butler, Daniel Baron, Virginia Hardy, Tom Gregory, Wendy Brannen and Kevin Horton; to hear a whole room of people having dialogue around stuff that was sitting in my head...it was overwhelming. I literally sat in this room – in the middle of an interview – and wept because it was beyond what I thought was within the realm of possibility in Indiana.

That was my initial intro to NSRF, so I assumed NSRF as a national organization looked very much like my experience in Indianapolis. I assumed NSRF was about 70 percent African-American; I thought they were bringing people in the room proportionately. When I went to my first Winter Meeting, I nearly passed out as I realized that the folks they brought in for the interview made up about 70 percent of all of the people of color.

So a lot of that initial CELL conversation, which drilled into this thing we call equity, became a real thing for me when we were having our national conversation about whether or not every CFG was equity-based. My question was, “How can they not be?” CFG work that is done in the absence of explicitly named inequities will only continue to get us what we have always gotten, (continued on page 12)

and we already know that's unacceptable.

Anyone who has done anti-racist work knows you cannot fight racism and "back equity" if you cannot first name the issue of race and what your goals are. It does not happen by accident.

What was your experience in being trained as a CFG coach?

I was trained in Indianapolis by Daniel Baron. I was in charge of bringing in the training prior to being trained myself. I was being trained along with all the school leaders I was responsible for.

It was awkward to go with my role as a senior fellow, switch to participant at the table with teachers and new principals for whom the work was new, and then debrief each night to assess the quality of work. It was a huge dance of stepping in and out of the role of being trained vs. worrying about quality assurance and making sure coaches had the resources and materials they needed. Then, I had to go to the next level of discourse when considering the political implications and consequences for our district, our center and our university partner. I was wearing many different hats.

It was beneficial in that it enabled me to talk of the power and significance of CFG work through the varied lenses of teacher, central office, university partner and even board for related decisions. (As a side note, I think we are missing a lot of important work by not preparing pre-service teachers in CFGs.)

How has being part of a larger – albeit not as large as you originally thought – national effort impacted your original journey to interrupt the system?

More than anything, I have greater resolve and confidence in my work when I know that I have colleagues who are doing the same work, the same way, in other parts of the country.

Tim Wise was giving a lecture and someone said to him afterwards, "Thank you for just letting me know that I am not crazy." When Tim asked why he said this, the person explained that when thinking and feeling things, the tendency is to be made to feel that you're the only one and that this somehow relates to an abnormality. When we are

not alone, we know we are not crazy and our work is not in vain, we are not the sole voice in the wind.

I think that one of the things that really needs to happen is that we need to talk, individually and organizationally, about our work outside our own circle. We as coaches and facilitator sometimes become so entrenched in our own work that we forget to tell the outside who we are, what we do, and the significance of it all.

Even if we really dig in together and if we name it, educational equity, we as an organization still forget to tell the rest of the world who we are and what we are doing. People will remember the work getting done but will forget who did the work. We have to become better "PR" for ourselves

– especially in these tight economic times when people are being very thoughtful of who they bring in. We will work ourselves out of existence because others will pick up the credit.

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Don't we also want to be clear about what we are doing and who the "we" are, in part so that people who can do the work are the one's doing it? Are we afraid to say who that is...who can lead equity work?

It can be done – but it has to be done across racial difference! As we really dig into the cultures of schools, we have to look at this work across difference – all differences. We have to make sure that as a team of facilitators, we are representative of the population we intend to serve. And, even if everyone looks like you – not everybody is like you. There is a deeper conversation that needs to happen amongst those that don't know this. No single, homogenous group of people can do this work without a cross section. Well-intentioned as they may be, I don't think it is possible.

Finally, what are your hopes and fears for NSRF?

I hope that NSRF will truly insert itself in the national dialogue for authentic school reform. With President Obama's push for authentic learning environments and alternative assessments, we are the perfect organization to be at the forefront of that change. ■

Brandon Cosby can be reached at bdcosby@yahoo.com. Greg Peters can be reached at gpeter@sfcess.org.