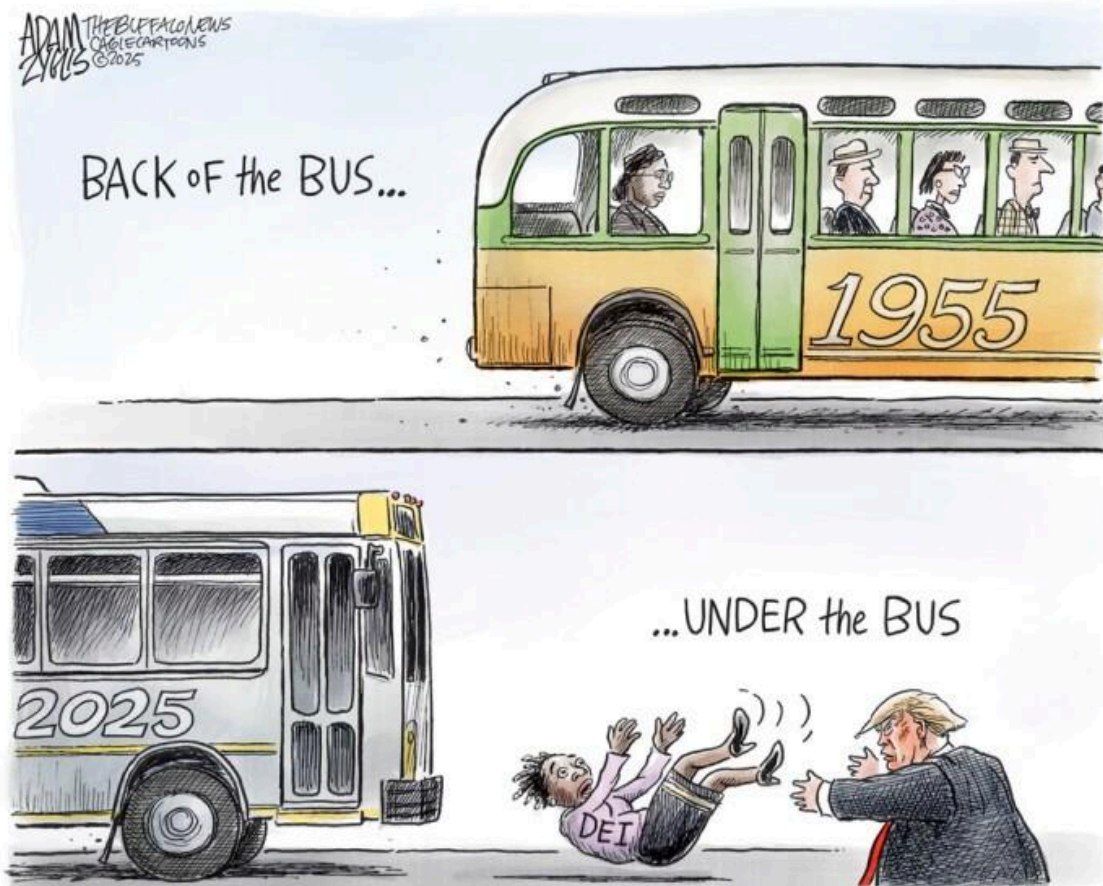


OPINION COLUMNS

Local View: Courageous institutions like Duluth Chamber know value of DEI

From the column: "Diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, programs were instituted in the workplace for the purpose of enlightenment, transformation, and racial synergy."

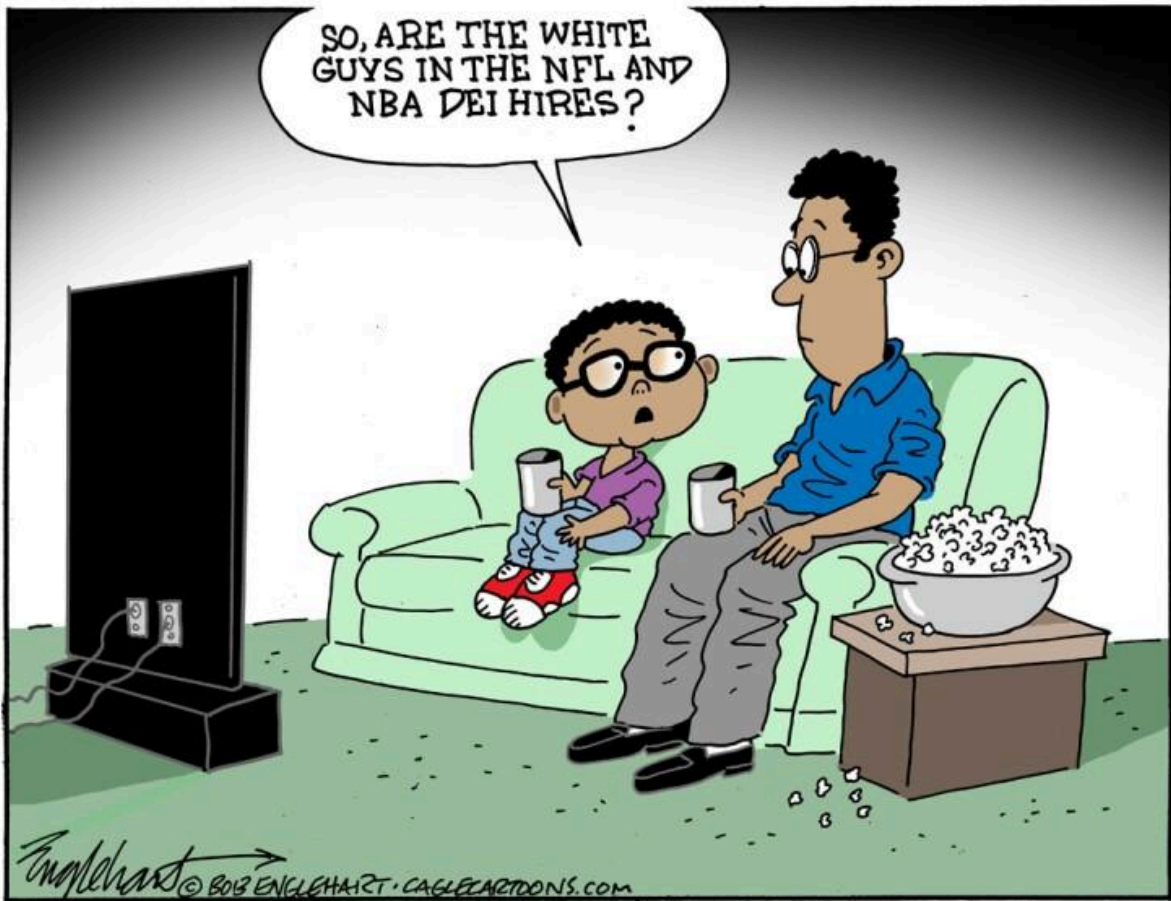


Opinion by David McGrath, March 27, 2025

The first time I saw African Americans in person our father was taking the family to the beach in Whiting, Indiana, a half hour drive from our home in Evergreen Park, Illinois, nicknamed by some locals at the time as “Everwhite” Park.

Two boys, around the same age as me, were walking down the sidewalk along Indianapolis Boulevard, leading their dog on a rope. As my brother and I gawked through the back seat passenger window, he wondered aloud, “Do you think that beagle knows he’s a colored person’s dog?”

An inane question, to be sure, but not surprising coming from a 10-year-old whose only notions of African Americans were the stereotypes we learned from relatives and classmates.



The only Black people we were aware of were professional athletes my uncles mocked at Communion and birthday parties, so that we grew up, for example, believing Larry Doby was a lazy and lousy baseball player. When someone on our team committed an error, we called him Larry Doby. The same Doby who was a Gold Glove center fielder and played in nine All Star Games.

In the mid-1960s when my mother was ill and overwhelmed, our kind and wealthy Aunt Kay sent over her African American maid, Matea, to help with housekeeping. Her first day, my brothers and I ran home from school and piled into the den, where we regularly watched afternoon TV and where Matea was ironing clothes.

We switched the channel from “The Flintstones” to a rerun of “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” the first Black (albeit stereotypical) sitcom. When we stole a glance to see if she approved, Matea simply smiled, accustomed to the naive cruelty of the white children she cleaned up after.

Across the street, my grandparents Rose and Joe had bought a home, and, sometimes, in pleasant weather, we could hear bellowing through their open windows, with shouts and curses from my mother’s brother Uncle Eddie and her youngest brother Don arguing about politics and race.

The elder Eddie, a rabid fan of conservative radio host Howard Miller, could very well have been the model for Archie Bunker, the lead character in the long-running “All in the Family” TV show.

Whereas, Don was the first family member to attend college, eventually becoming an attorney based in Oak Lawn, Illinois. His logical rebuttals and poignant portrayals of Black families with legal needs whom he had helped were more credible than Eddie’s generalizations about so-called lazy, deadbeat, dishonest African Americans he never met.

Subsequently, many of the rest of my wrongheaded notions were shattered after I was hired as an English teacher at Chicago Vocational High School, with 99% Black student enrollment and 50% for faculty. Following, predictably, several months of culture shock for this Catholic “Everwhite” Parker, I started shedding stereotypes and building friendships with the people I lived and worked with every day. Many, particularly other English teachers, shared hard-earned

lessons in judging character, motivating youth, overcoming tragedy, and withstanding workplace stress while still maintaining optimism with humor and hope.

One unseasonably warm weekend in winter, while fishing Chicago's lakefront with a boyhood friend, we took to swapping gossip stories about work, since the perch were not cooperating.

I described my struggle with discipline in the early going of my career, which I was able to turn around with helpful advice from my other fishing partner, an experienced teacher.

He had advised that my teenage students were likely "sandbagging," that they were capable of greater challenges, that I must not abide excuses and should set strict expectations, and that instead of compromising out of misplaced kindness I should show them how high they could go. When my friend realized the mentor I was referencing was African American, he expressed surprise about a Black man advocating rigorous standards and old-fashioned values.

Many of my generation, including college-educated professionals, retain prejudices and stereotypes with which they were raised, absent meaningful interrelationships with people of color. Including our current president, an Ivy League graduate, who famously remarked in his first term that Frederick Douglass was "somebody who's done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more, I notice" and who bragged in his last campaign that Black people probably [like him more](#) since he had been criminally indicted.

This knowledge chasm is why Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of racial integration uplifting all of society. And why diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, programs were instituted in the workplace for the purpose of enlightenment, transformation, and racial synergy.

While such initiatives in government, education, and private enterprise afford opportunities that had previously been out of reach for minorities, its equally important purpose is to eliminate ignorance. To bring Black and white together, to promote mutual understanding, and to unify Americans for a more humane and productive society.

Trump's executive order eliminating DEI jeopardizes those social and educational gains made in the past three decades. It also could hobble the country financially, according to a [study by Citigroup](#) in 2022, which found that the U.S. economy would enjoy a \$5 trillion boost over a five-year period if discriminatory practices are mitigated with the help of DEI.

More American institutions should join courageous corporations like Apple, Duluth's own [Chamber of Commerce](#), Costco, the Duluth Trading Company, Goldman Sachs, and J.P. Morgan, along with schools like Notre Dame, the [University of Minnesota](#), the [University of Illinois](#), and Wesleyan in refusing to retreat from 40 years of racial intercommunication and cooperation by continuing to promote fair treatment and full participation of all Americans through DEI.

David McGrath is formerly of Hayward; is an emeritus professor of English at the College of DuPage in Illinois; is an author, most recently of "[Far Enough Away](#);" and is a frequent

contributor to the News Tribune Opinion page. He can be reached at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com .