**Crossing Borders**

Doris Meissner ’63, MA’69 was in her kitchen stuffing a turkey on Thanksgiving Day when she heard news reports of a young boy who had been rescued by fishermen off the coast of Miami.

“I thought, ‘Oh, my gosh. This is sad,’” she recalled in an interview. “But I didn’t believe that it was going to become such a phenomenon, such an incredible issue.”

Over the past year, the Elián González saga has been the most high-profile controversy of Doris Meissner’s tenure as commissioner of the INS. But Meissner, who was in Madison in May to accept a Distinguished Alumni Award from the Wisconsin Alumni Association, has received praise for her handling of the crisis.

Meeting Democratic senator Patty Murray, Meissner was amused. “Growing up, your parents tell you it’s your character that’s important,” she remarked with a very smile. “When you come to Washington, you learn it’s how your hair looks and what you’re wearing that counts.” She didn’t fall for the flattery, her calm but insistent manner proved to be a valuable resource.

“Everyone was so tired that people’s tempers started to flare,” says First. “She would get us to focus on the issue at hand — that this is a six-year-old kid whose father says he wants to be reunited with him.”

Meissner’s recognition of the father’s parental rights was supported by Attorney General Janet Reno, and upheld in federal court. Behind the scenes, Meissner served as Reno’s confidante, and took an active role in the delicate negotiations between Washington and Cuba, and with the González family members.

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With the Miami relatives unwilling to turn over the boy, Janet Reno inched to closer the decision she dreaded: ordering government agents to remove him by force. With Meissner at her side, Reno flew to Miami in mid-April to meet with Lazaro González, the great uncle in whose home Elián was staying. The meeting ended in a stalemate, and soon after, the Miami relatives released a video of Elián jabbing his finger at the camera and telling Papá that “This was right. Pale and drawn from lack of sleep, Meissner defended the actions of the INS agents, who whisked Elián to the airport to fly to Washington, where an INS SWAT team positioned itself for a surprise raid to retrieve Elián.

Not by nature a public person, Meissner stood next to Reno in a press conference immediately following the raid. "We created the reunification." He appeared coached, was suffering from a form of child abuse. The boy was no longer attending school, and had become a trophy for the anti-Castro exile community.

Reno and Meissner engaged in one last marathon negotiation by phone from Washington with the Miami relatives, while an INS SWAT team positioned itself for a surprise raid to retrieve Elián.

Meissner's serious, almost scholarly approach to immigration issues shielded her from the raw partisanship that has characterized much of the Clinton administration's dealings with Congress. The INS has deep bureaucratic roots, and immigration issues don't fall neatly along party lines. With Hispanics the fastest-growing group in the United States since 1990, the most in any decade in U.S. history. The INS work force has nearly doubled, from eighteen thousand to thirty-two thousand, making it the largest law enforcement agency in the country.

Meissner says that the accelerated procedures were put in place to accommodate caseloads that had quadrupled in just two years, in part because of the anti-immigrant debate generated under Governor Pete Wilson in California.

The result was that some three hundred people with criminal backgrounds were naturalized (out of a total of 1.3 million processed) in just eight months. "This was a very glitzy service, with lots of people walking around looking at each other and wanting to be seen by each other, very frankly," Meissner remembered. "And there I was with Pamela Harriman, who never looked around at anybody else."

Harriman told her that Chuck Meissner had been in her embassy in London the night before the ill-fated flight, and that he and the others had such high hopes for the work they were doing to spur economic investment in Croatia.

She told Meissner that she was married to a man, the late New York Governor Averell Harriman, who grew very, very old. "It is not the worst thing to die for your country," she said. "Growing old, watching everybody around you die, having people forget who you are, there's nothing nice about that."

Those words comforted Meissner, and helped to put her husband's death into perspective. "It's so true," she says, reflecting on the conversation. "Chuck was at the top of his game. He loved what he was doing, and you can't quarrel with that. None of us get to pick our luck.

Only weeks after her husband's death, Meissner was back at her desk. Her job, says her brother-in-law, "gave her something else to think about other than what happened to her." Meissner agrees. "As hard as it was, this job has sustained me," she says. "You have to function. There is just no choice. And it's much better to have a purpose, to have something to do and to just keep pushing away, which is what I've done."

Last summer, Meissner and her two grown children — Christine, a teacher, and Andrew, who works with an Internet company — flew to Dubrovnik at the invitation of the Croatian government to celebrate the signing of a deal Chuck had negotiated that means millions of dollars in energy capacity for the region.
Crossing Borders

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A Sturdy Hand

Meissner’s story, she says, “is really a story of two.” She met Chuck when they were both freshmen enrolled in the Integrated Liberal Studies program at the University of Wisconsin. They married two years before graduation in 1963. Chuck went on to graduate school, and Doris supported the family while he earned his doctorate.

A member of the ROTC, Chuck left for Vietnam in 1969 and didn’t return until 1971. Doris and their two children stayed in Madison, which was embroiled in anti-war protests. It was a hard time for Meissner, who was apart from her husband and worried about him, and raising their two children alone.

As an undergrad, she majored in history with a minor in French, and returned to graduate school to major in political science and education policy. Her undergrad days had been placed, but now, all around her, students were protesting. At one point, when she was a teaching assistant, her classes were canceled for several weeks because student unrest had forced the university to close down.

Perhaps because she had sole responsibility for her children, Meissner concluded that protesting wasn’t for her, and that change should come about responsibly. “I concluded that protesting wasn’t for her, and that I could see all of this responsibility becoming ours,” she says. “But Chuck was committed — and Doris relented.”

When it became known that the Meissners had a refugee family living in their basement, it was Doris’s colleagues who assumed that she was just as dedicated as her husband. That impression may have helped her to win her party’s nomination for the Northwestern Political Caucus (NWPC). She recruited Meissner to become a staff aide on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and had traveled regularly to Vietnam. When the city of Saigon fell, signaling the end of the war, Chuck urged Doris to join him in sponsoring a refugee family. “I was not into this at all,” she says. “It was not an issue that I had paid very much attention to, except vicariously through his work, and I could see all of this responsibility becoming ours.” But Chuck was committed — and Doris relented.

When she was summoned first to the White House for an interview, and then to meet with Attorney General Janet Reno. The Clinton administration had set aside certain senior appointments as positions that required technical expertise, and Meissner’s name showed up on everybody’s short list.

For years, the immigration agency was a backwater. Most of the commissioners were political appointees who came in with little or no substantive experience. Reno convinced Meissner that, as attorney general, she would take immigration issues seriously. After all, Reno had seen firsthand how immigration had changed Miami, the community in which she grew up. “Now that was very unusual,” notes Meissner, who by then had worked for seven or eight attorneys general. “Attorneys general just never paid attention to immigration.”

Little did Meissner know that one November day, a young boy would arrive on Miami’s shore, and a fight over his permanent home would begin. Little did she know that, in time, the entire world would be paying attention to immigration.

Meissner’s contribution Eleanor Clift, of Washington, D.C., has profiled three UW women for Wisconsin TV (Wisconsin Public Television) journalist Bia Braver ‘70, U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky ‘72, and Doris Meissner ‘63, MA ‘69.

“Getting to know them up close and personal,” Clift writes, “I can share Wisconsin’s pride in their achievements. Doris Meissner and I discovered a particular bond in that we are both daughters of German immigrants, and grew up in ethnic communities.”
On just about any of the endless days of Alaskan summer, a visitor to Sitka National Historical Park can peer out from the rain forest toward the sea and catch a vista of a massive ocean liner parked just off shore. The sight may seem incongruous — a luxurious megaship dwarfing the harbor of a tiny fishing village. But its presence on the waterfront actually tells much about why Sitka developed in the way that it has.

For more than five thousand years, travelers have arrived at Sitka by boat. The village exists on the ledge of life, clinging to the shore of an island in Alaska’s Inner Passage and hemmed in on three sides by forbidding mountains. Nine thousand people live among its attractive tangle of streets, but if any of them were to walk an hour in any direction, they would find themselves amid utter wilderness, land so fierce and untamed that the great naturalist John Muir described it as God’s laboratory. There are no bridges to Sitka, and barely any roads beyond town. Water is Sitka’s superhighway.

The boats that come to Sitka these days bring tourists, nearly three hundred thousand of them arriving each year, making the town one of the most popular travel destinations in the nation’s largest state. But if those travelers come expecting wilderness, they will be disappointed. Although it is unquestionably remote, and one can see in any direction the vast, formidable outback Alaska is famous for, Sitka is civilization to its core.

It was in Sitka, for instance, that Russian fur hunters established the world’s most powerful trading company, and it was there that the United States established the territorial government of Alaska after buying the land from Russia in 1867. Long before that, some millennia ago, clans of the Tlingit tribe (pronounced Klíng-íť) settled in Sitka, and they have stayed there ever since. Sitka’s national park, part of the eighty million American acres protected and managed by the National Park Service, covers only fifty-six acres, barely the picnic grounds at more-sprawling cousins in the park system. But its land, surrounding the banks of the Indian River, has been some of the most valued territory in the state — land so precious to Russian and Tlingit cultures that bloody battles resulted over its control.

Yet for a place of such human vitality, Sitka’s park is a strangely quiet place. It is a historical park, yes, but only in a whispered, ghostly sense. Visitors come here to amble peacefully in a gorgeous and inspiring forest. It is as if the banks of the Indian River, which bustled with human activity for thousands of years, have been frozen in perpetuity, as if put behind glass.

This may seem like the desired result when you set aside a parcel of land to be preserved. As in national parks across the country, much effort goes into making sure that nothing changes at Sitka. It’s part of an active management philosophy to ensure that the unspoiled beauty of such places remains unspoiled. A laudable goal, no doubt, but at what cost? More people, including a growing community of experts at universities such as Wisconsin, are beginning to question the long-accepted axiom that national parks should be sheltered tracts of wilderness never touched by human hands.
Arnold Alanen, a UW-Madison professor of landscape architecture who has spent the last five years studying Sitka, is one of them. He doesn’t understand why we consider park lands only as wilderness, given that almost none of them are. “Just about the whole earth now is a cultural landscape,” says Alanen. “There have been interactions with humans everywhere, even on Mount Everest.”

In Sitka, a long history of human interaction explains why the Indian River and the surrounding rain forest hold high spiritual value for the Tlingit, who survived on the area’s natural resources for five thousand years. Living in small camps along the river’s banks, the tribe fished the waters, hunted sea otter and deer, and carved paths through the forest for plant gathering. When Russian traders set up a colony on the island in 1799, the Tlingit fiercely defended their stake, nearly wiping out the Russian village in 1802. Two years later, Russians retaliated, ransacking the Tlingit fort that stood near the shore and devastating the village in 1804. Discouraged by the new forces controlling the lands, they eventually stopped fishing the river and holding ceremonies.

The only sounds heard on the banks of the Indian River were the whir and click of tourists’ cameras. In an attempt to preserve Tlingit culture and heritage for future generations, the National Park Service did what the Russians, the colonists, and the bitter Alaskan night were not able to do: it drove the Tlingit from the banks of the Indian River.

In 1865, a young Scottish immigrant left the University of Wisconsin to sample the splendor of the American frontier. The son of a brutal and demanding father, John Muir believed that nature had a spiritual value for the natural world. Those many roles represent a monumental management challenge: how do we ensure that parks endure as symbols for generations to come? And what should they symbolize?

That debate has been quietly percolating in places such as Sitka, which may be the perfect example of a park pulled in opposite directions. It’s an unquestionably beautiful place, with a dense swath of old-growth rain forest and breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and sea. But the park also contains many artifacts of human culture, such as the site of the Tlingit fort and a collection of totem poles carved by Tlingit and other tribal artisans. We’re meant to feel the gravity of human history — but not so much that it makes us feel as if we’ve come all the way to Alaska without desecrating civilization.

In parks such as Sitka, human history often gets treated this way. Too much of it is believed to be distracting to the spiritual and natural wonder of a setting. Is it possible for a place to be both natural and manmade at the same time? That question intrigued Arnold Alanen while visiting his daughter in Alaska in 1994. When he casually asked at the regional office of the National Park Service what park managers were doing to help promote cultural preservation in Sitka, he ended up signing on for a multiyear research project.

Along with Holly Smith-Middleton, then a student in the UW’s doctoral program, Alanen explored every inch of the Sitka landscape, sometimes spending months at a time there. The result is five hundred pages of evaluation and recommendations, which outline how Sitka can be a living museum, where culture is not merely explained, but preserved, protected, and practiced.

Underlying the Sitka report is a concept in environmental study known as the cultural landscape. It’s basically a way of acknowledging that there is more to nature than nature — that most landscapes have been shaped to some extent by human activity. You might think of a land’s cultural fingerprint as being like the effects of a volcano. Lava streams and ash give us visible clues as to how a volcano’s eruptions have changed the landscape. People like Alanen and Smith-Middleton, sometimes referred to as landscape historians, look for manmade formations such as foot trails, camps, and old structures that show how humans have affected the land, and how they have been affected by it.

Alanen, one of the pioneers of the field, has worked in places from Michigan’s Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore to aboriginal lands in the Australian outback, detailing their cultural characteristics. In Sitka, he says managers were doing a fair job of communicating culture. Signs and markers are located throughout the park, spelling out the specifics of the Tlingit battle and the meanings of the totem poles. Displays in the visitors center add more information about how Tlingit settlers lived, as well as providing a home for Indian woodworkers and craftsmen.

But those features don’t get at the deeper appreciation that Alanen wants people to derive from their interactions with nature. More than exhibits of the totem poles placed in Sitka’s park nearly a century ago. As illustrated above right, UW researchers have suggested thinning the spruce trees and undergrowth to help visitors appreciate the grand, looming poles as they were intended to be seen.
When Smith-Middelton began to interview Sitka residents, one of the park's shortcomings as a cultural experience became apparent. She found that many had no direct experience with the park lands. Only elderly residents could recall ceremonial events held prior to World War II. Since then, Tlingit culture in the park has become largely allegory — a tale told for the entertainment of others, rather than preservation among the Tlingit themselves. "Many of the Tlingit — especially the most recent generation — don’t know the traditional uses of these lands," says Smith-Middelton. "They need to be the ones who are telling the story to the public. It's their story." Thus, a major theme in the researchers' final report became the reintegration of Tlingit participation in the parks.

Some of the suggested policies may seem unorthodox on the surface. The researchers have recommended, for instance, that Tlingit elders be allowed to close the park for private ceremonies and that subsistence fishing be permitted within park borders. Other proposals would heighten visitors' awareness of the environment as the Tlingit and Russian explorers experienced it, such as cutting down trees that have encroached on the fort site. As it is now, those trees shut off views of the water and prevent people from understanding why the fort made sense as a strategic site.

The recommendations are based on managing Sitka not as a natural place, or as a cultural place, but as an inexorable combination. Alane says the plan will help visitors to "go beyond the park's shortcomings as a cultural experience. They loved nature, says Tuan, as though they were born to it, nature tends to get separated and specially marked off, practically making these areas cathedrals. Ironically, notes Tuan, "the very setting that moved national parks. What do people want to get out of a national park visit? Those expectations, he argues, play a big role in how parks are managed.

People usually have well-formed notions about how a park should look and feel. Environmental historians will tell you, however, that such expectations are influenced not only by direct experience with nature, but by things written or said about nature — anything from Robert Frost to The Blair Witch Project. Ye-Fu Tuan, an emeritus professor of geography, often would begin his seminars by asking students to write a short narrative about a place that held great significance to them. Invariably, he found, they wrote about nature, despite the fact that most of them had spent nearly all of their lives in cities. "I knew from talking to them that they enjoyed living in these cities," says Tuan. "But somehow those experiences were repressed in them."

Instead, students allowed romanticized imagery to substitute for their own experience. They loved nature, says Tuan, as though they were born to it, nature tends to get separated and specially marked off, practically making these areas cathedrals. Ironically, notes Tuan, "the very setting that moved national parks. What do people want to get out of a national park visit? Those expectations, he argues, play a big role in how parks are managed.

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Abuse it...

and lose it

It’s not hard to understand why many people don’t want any sign of human existence in natural areas. Humans haven’t always been the best guests. A few of the things people do in and around national parks so damage their physical environment that some envi-
ronmental activists warn that the parks may not survive our use of them. The National Parks Conserva-
tion Association, a private watchdog group, cites ten parks that it considers the most endangered, listed here with the activities that threaten them:

- Petrified Forest National Park (Arizona): Thieves and vandalism result in the park losing twelve tons of fossilized wood each year.
- Yellowstone (Wyoming): During winter, as many as one thousand snowmobilers each day descend on the park (despite laws against rid-
ing in the park), creating noise and air pollution.
- Denali (Alaska): Snowmobilers, plus game for new roads and a resort within park grounds.
- Great Smoky Mountains (Ten-
nessee/ North Carolina): Air pollu-
tion from vehicles and nearby power plants.
- Joshua Tree (California): Proposed landfill near park borders.
- Stones River National Battlefield (Tennessee): A planned highway would cut through the park.
- Ozaarks Scenic Riverways (Missouri/Southern Arkansas): Allow miners to explore the park's cultural centers.
- Tatitlek (Alaska): May allow miners to explore the park, creating noise and air pollution.
- Halsekala (Hawaii): Possible air-
port expansion and creeping non-
native plant invasions.
Overcoming sometimes daunting odds, these alumni found their true calling at UW-Madison — even if they didn’t know it at the time.

By Susan Pigorsch ’80

She had been her college career, in a word, and it stopped that way,” writes Lorraine Hansberry’s sister, with her experience on To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.

“The point of things eluded her — things like classes and note-taking and lectures and lab. She found most of them unpalatable stuff and unenlightening to virtually anything she had ever had on her mind or ever expected to.” On top of it, she was one of only a few African-American students on campus at the time, an urban out-of-stater, and a woman at that. “All that she imagined college to be had yet to materialize,” says Hansberry. “The only thing which had not disappointed was — the snow. What, what was it about the snow?”

At that moment, the first black playwright to win the Best Play of the Year Award from the New York Drama Critics had not a clue as to what would be her calling. Vikings and Scandinavian lore captivated her, yet she was beginning to become one with the “sound of the mighty Congo drum.” To give her soul some reprieve — perhaps to rest her eyes from the lake’s flat white — Hansberry wandered into the modern curves of the Wisconsin Union Theater, which was opening the student production of June and the Paycock, by Sean O’Casey.

“An incredible thing happened to her here,” recounts theater manager Michael Goldberg ’64. “But first remember that she came from Chicago, and that she wrote that she wasn’t necessarily a happy camper in Madison. It was a time when she was considered not an African-American, but a Negro.” Coming in from the cold that day in the late forties, she collapsed into the theater’s earth-colored upholstery, and soaked up O’Casey’s Irish dialect. She came out in a daze. Hansberry had been enraptured by O’Casey’s honest ode to the human condition — its Irish drunkards, Irish upholstery, and soaked up O’Casey’s Irish dialect. She came out in a daze.

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“It was a life-transforming experience,” Hansberry continues. “It was a life-transforming experience.” Hansberry had been enraptured by O’Casey’s honest ode to the human condition — its Irish drunkards, Irish upholstery, and soaked up O’Casey’s Irish dialect. She came out in a daze. Hansberry had been enraptured by O’Casey’s honest ode to the human condition — its Irish drunkards, Irish upholstery, and soaked up O’Casey’s Irish dialect. She came out in a daze.

And that part of the story would take two more generations to develop.

The University of Wisconsin has long been the place where students — both the ambitious and the ambivalent — have found opportunities and intellectual insights that would have otherwise stayed shrouded. By its very creation, this land grant institution was designed to educate individuals with promise — regardless of pedigree. The children of immigrants needed blue blood to break the ice around the Ivy League. But the people of Wisconsin voted to build bridges to their university of higher learning, and invited the world to come to Madison to take part in an unprecedented approach to higher education.

John Muir, the son of Scottish immigrants, came from nearby Portage. Upon having his epiphany over the similarities between the pool of a pea and that of a locust tree, he went on to become the visionary founder of our national park system (see story, page 26).

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In May, Cuban-born Eduardo Santana became the first student of Hispanic origin to receive a professional degree in wildlife ecology. He had a rocky start at Madison back in the mid-seventies, but went on to pursue his passion: the conservation of North American birds.

Joann Jones, head of the Ho-Chunk Nation from 1991–95, received three degrees from the UW — after raising four children. She was chosen as the outstanding alumna of the year in 2000 by the Indian law student association.

We heard from Edwardo Santana ’79, MS’86, PhD’00, a Cuban who grew up in Puerto Rico, and gained his desire to learn about the natural world while tromping through the woods with his father, a contractor who built roads and bridges. With luck, he enrolled at Madison at age seventeen. But like Lorraine Hansberry, he had trouble finding his footing. Coming from a high school of only 350 students, he viewed the University of Wisconsin as being like a huge monster. He’d had a bad experience as well, “with a professor who, when I...
asked him a question after class, told me that I did not belong in college," he writes. Fortunately, his adviser, a medical student, suggested that he should talk with Professor Joe Hickey, a wildlife ecologist, whose course he’d enjoyed as an elective. "My adviser was black," Santana says, "so I finally had my ‘union card,’ which, in this business, is my PhD."

KELLY COTTER ’98 NOT ONLY FOUND HER FUTURE AT UW–MADISON — it saved her life. This native of the city was diagnosed with leukemia in 1988. Under the care of the UW Comprehensive Cancer Center, she received a bone marrow transplant from her then-eight-year-old brother, Adam. The procedure was a success, and Kelly went on to explore all that UW-Madison could offer under the care of the UW Comprehensive Cancer Center, where she focuses on the conservation of birds in North America.

"Joe Hickey would be pleased," Santana says. "I finally have my ‘union card,’ which, in this business, is my PhD."

FINDING ONE’S TRUE CALLING DOESN’T ALWAYS HAPPEN WHEN YOU’RE AN UNDERGRADUATE, of course. It can take much more time — and seasoning — as it did for Joann Jones ’82, MS’83, JD’87 of Wisconsin Dells. The former president of the Ho-Chunk Nation originally had no desire to attend college. Raising four children, wherever her spouse’s career with Kodak took them was demanding enough. Yet she found time to teach Indian culture in the schools of North Carolina, Texas, and Florida. And through her work, she discovered that state and local government aid programs to the tribes weren’t succeeding because there weren’t enough American Indians with degrees to run them.

"I wanted to get a political science degree so I would know the political systems Indian people had to deal with," Jones told On Wisconsin Magazine. Starting at age thirty-six, she began her undergraduate degree — and daily commute to Madison. But as soon as she had earned her bachelor’s, she realized that she needed more. "I wanted to learn about the human services departments, because large numbers of our people are served by these agencies," she recalls. So she went on to earn a master’s in sociology. Then she realized that most Indian issues end up in the courts, so she went back to school yet again — this time, to earn her third UW degree, in law. Jones was elected tribal president shortly thereafter, when a schism split the nation over casino and gaming issues, and what should be done with the millions of dollars in profits.

"I foresee all those who want to further their education doing so," Jones says of the casino income, echoing the sentiments of the Wisconsin Alumni Association’s American Indian Alumni Council, which has raised more than $100,000 to help Indian students attend UW-Madison. "I see UW graduates returning home with their skills to build our communities into viable places to live."

Jones says it doesn’t matter if students are seventeen, or forty-seven-year-old returning adults. What matters is taking advantage of one’s educational opportunities.

"YOU WOULDN’T EXPECT ANDRÉ DE SHIELDS ’70 TO EVER COME BACK TO THE UW. After all, this Emmy winner and Tony Award nominee was only here for eighteen months in the late sixties. As a transfer student, his tumultuous tenure spanned protests against the Vietnam War, the black student strike, and the Mifflin Street riots. As an African-American actor, he says he was denied a leading role in any campus production, as these roles were thought to be written exclusively for white males. And even the alternative student acting troupe he helped to launch — “Screw Theater, with exclusively for white males” — was closed down after just two Union Play Circle performances. They were controversial enough, in fact, to make their way into Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show” monologues.

"It’s no secret. For thirty years, there were no black students on campus, at least not in the mainstream,” De Shields recalls. "It was twenty-five when I was cast as El Gallo in their debut production of the Fantasticks. It’s a role that is ordinarily the sole domain of white actors, and it was a first in non-traditional casting.” It was 1968, and De Shields had met with success, yet he brooded for nearly three decades because he’d only acted off campus, at alternative venues.

"At a time when the fortunes of exclusivity were being challenged and dissolved around this country, the university still institutionalized — I won’t say racism — but racial elitism,” De Shields notes. "It wasn’t until 1998 that I could do what I had always dreamed of doing here: to act while being embraced by the resources of my chosen profession.

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“Those values and those relationships that have become the foundation of my adult life, and that will carry me through for the rest of my life, were established in part during the eighteen months I spent as a student at the University of Wisconsin.”

He’d unexpectedly reconnected with old friends, beginning with the Union’s Michael Goldberg, and something began to change.

“Although I could not have known it then, my lifelong friendships were established at Madison, and that’s what’s important to me,” De Shields says. “Those values and those relationships that have become the foundation of my adult life, and that will carry me through for the rest of my life, were established in part during the eighteen months I spent as a student at the University of Wisconsin.”

So it was easy to accept the Madison Rep’s invitation to come back to Madison, and to continue to reconnect with friends such as Zorba Paster ’69 and Ben Sidran ’67. “Then Sandy Adell from African Studies and Sally Banes from the Department of Theater and Drama asked me if I could please come and speak to their students,” De Shields remembers. “I was happy to comply, but dismayed that the African-American students were still so few in number, and were still lodging the same concerns that I had thirty years before — that there was very little opportunity for artistic self-expression, and that there seemed to be hardly any commitment to multiculturalism, blind casting, and inclusion.” Together, students, faculty, and the seasoned alumnus brainstormed: What could they do to make a difference?

“That’s when the whole idea of the Lorraine Hansberry Visiting Professorship got started,” De Shields continues. “Every semester, an individual with both scholarly insights and firsthand knowledge of underrepresented ethnic minorities in the dramatic arts will come to campus to assist with student productions and the university’s cultural community. “The hope of the idea is that there will be permanent evidence attesting to the university’s commitment to diversity,” De Shields explains.

“We must realize how everyone’s higher learning experience is diminished because of the ill-conceived approach of homogeneous education,” he concludes. “We must, we absolutely must, reflect in our approach to education the diverse society that has always prevailed in America.”

As a young person, De Shields believed revolution must “happen now, or it won’t happen ever,” he says. “My realization as an adult is that revolution is a constant thing, a continuum. The change has to happen from one generation to the next, and each successive generation is informed by the former generation. So what we are achieving now is the seed of change that was not planted first in the sixties, but back in the fifties” — when playwright Lorraine Hansberry was young, gifted, and black on campus, and A Raisin in the Sun still clung to the vine.

“It took two full generations of students passing through the university to finally say, ‘Enough is enough,’” De Shields adds. “We must now do something concrete and lasting so that the mission of the school rings true to a higher and equal education for all who pursue those goals.”

Many thanks to interns Kira Winter ’99 and Jill Cornell ’99 for coordinating the “Alumni Who Made a Difference” project. If you know of someone who found a starting point at UW-Madison after facing obstacles to education elsewhere, please write to us at “Alumni Who Made a Difference,” 650 N. Lake Street, Madison, WI 53706, or e-mail WAA@uwalumni.com.