

Historical Perspective: A look at the life of Barbara Laffoon Sizemore (Part II)

- By Mike McCormick
- Apr 7, 2007

When a search committee at DePaul University of Chicago was seeking a new dean of the School of Education, Dr. Barbara Laffoon Sizemore's name surfaced.

Sizemore had no compelling reason to leave the University of Pittsburgh. She was a tenured full professor. However, she changed her mind when she met Father John Richardson, DePaul University president.

"When he explained 'the DePaul Mission,' I knew I had to work here," she later told an interviewer.

"When he told me of the Vincentian principle of access for everyone, I recognized that it was something I wanted to do all my life. For the first time ... the institution's mission where I would work and my own were the same.

"I came to DePaul ... and found that what he said was true, the university's administration was truly committed to enabling the poor and disenfranchised ..."

Though she had experienced racial injustice directly, including the death of her father at the hands of white police officer, she was not bitter. It simply made her determined to overcome injustice through education. She credits her mother, Delila Mae Alexander Laffoon, for inducing her to take that attitude.

"My mother would say: 'Look, these are the kinds of problems we have and we need to solve them,' Sizemore recalled. "Mother was 'a problem solver.'"

To illustrate her point, she remembered an incident in Terre Haute, “seared in my memory,” in 1940 on the day before Easter when her mother took her to get new shoes to wear on the holiday:

“My mother worked 12 or 13 hours and didn’t get off early so, when we got there, the store was closing. The clerks did not take any extra time; they wanted to go home.

“When we got home and opened the box we found that we had two left shoes. My mother said, ‘We’ll go back to the store.’

“It was Saturday night. I told her that the store would be closed but she insisted that she was going to solve this problem. Mother said, ‘Let’s go!’”

Barbara and her mother resided at 720 S. 13th St. “We walked down the railroad tracks,” she reminisced. “We got to the store and, as expected, found the door locked. We banged on the windows and doors and, finally, a janitor came.

“He said, ‘I can’t do anything about this.’ But Mother would not give up. She said please see if there is anyone who can help me. So he went back in and got this man and asked him if he could please help me and the man got me the right shoe.

“That incident was very instructive to me and guided me all my life. There’s always a solution to a problem. You must ask: how much time will you spend on it, how much effort do you want to put into it, how much do you want it to happen? If you want to solve a problem, you can find a way to do so.”

Sometimes she was forced to adjust. When the Wiley High School graduate enrolled at Northwestern University in 1944, she was informed she could not live on campus because of her race. When she graduated from the college, the Chicago teaching job market restricted her to black schools.

Frequently, Sizemore's "solution to the problem" was a position contrary to the popular stance held by the majority of black educators.

Blacks, she proudly asserted, are "the creative element in America" today with "seemingly unlimited potential." That creativity should be nurtured

Though she strongly favored pluralism and inclusiveness based upon gender, ethnicity, race and class in the school curricula, Sizemore eventually advocated the acceptance of standardized tests. If tests were not standardized, she concluded, the speed with which achievement gaps between children of differing backgrounds narrowed could not be measured.

She encouraged teachers to spend more time teaching vocabulary and grammar to educated youths and traditional phonics methods to children who could not read.

By hammering away at the need for results, Sizemore achieved notoriety and received funding to launch her School Achievement Structure (SAS) process, a mix of ten essential routines a school must initiate to offer a quality education. The routine raised standardized test scores at every school that instituted it.

There was a time when Barbara opposed standardization because she thought standardized tests were biased. Her credo, now a statement found in books of quotations, was: "The cry of the ghetto is being heard by a nation with its fingers in its ears."

Sizemore retired from DePaul in 1998 and died of cancer in Chicago on July 24, 2004, at age 76, after working in education for more than half a century. Her vision and message endure, particularly in the metropolitan Chicago area.

"She was a brilliant person," Dr. Nancy L. Arnez, professor at Howard University, asserted. "She tried to do some things in Washington, D.C., that people could not accept but the fact that she could stand up to authority is one of the things that

frightened people. Her approach to Congress was not one of supplication and begging.”

Sizemore shaped the doctoral program of the School of Education at DePaul to produce leaders to serve schools in the Chicago area and to increase the diversity of students, faculty and staff at the university.

Former colleagues describe Sizemore as “ahead of her time,” creating programs to help non-achieving students succeed. She also was well known for mentoring students, colleagues and staff, always with high expectations of their success.

“She loved a good debate about issues that were important to her,” Dr. Gayle Mindes reflected. “Yet even if she didn’t change your mind, you could agree to disagree and she respected you. She was warm and had a personal touch, regularly recognizing staff members for their good work.”

Dr. Charles Doyle, retired assistant dean of the School of Education, said: “She was a tireless worker who always managed to get things done. She was a great role model for educators and those who care about helping others take the next step up.”

She wrote countless articles on education in academic journals and two more books after returning to Chicago.

Among the honors she received were the Northwestern University Merit Award, United Nations Association Human Rights Award, Presidential Award from the National Council of Black Studies for Community Service, YMCA Racial Justice Award and the Promotion of Black Studies and Scholarship Award.