

Fall 2004

# [Sarah Lawrence Magazine Opening Letter from Michele Myers, Autumn 2004]

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# On My Mind

by Michele Tolela Myers, president



Jane Hoffir

**On Thursday, April 8, all Sarah Lawrence College classes were canceled so that students, faculty and staff could join in a campus-wide "Teach-In On Race, Bias and Exclusion." The following is President Myers's speech to open the events of the day.**

Thank you, all of you—students, faculty, staff, trustees—for being here this morning. I am moved by your response, which symbolizes this community's willingness to do what it takes to open itself up and wrestle with difficult issues.

There are so many people to thank: the members of Harambe, Apicad, Unidad and Hillel, who so thoughtfully organized several meetings to express student concerns about race and religion; the faculty, staff and students who have worked hard to organize the day and make this Teach-In happen; the leadership of General Committee; and the Board of Trustees, who listened carefully to the concerns I shared with them after hearing from many of you. Their encouragement to respond swiftly—and to do so not just today, but on an ongoing basis—reminds me that I am part of an institution willing to look at itself and engage its members in thoughtful conver-

sations, willing to risk dealing with both the emotional side and the analytical side of problems and to go beyond blame and guilt—in short, an institution willing to learn. Whether we know it and acknowledge it or not, all of us are touched and damaged by racism, bigotry and exclusion. It is important, therefore, that we not paper over the fact that on this campus, as well as on many other campuses, not everyone experiences being a student in the same way. For many, the experience is inflected by issues of race and identity.

I am outraged by examples of bigotry, hatred and insensitivity that are directed at members of our community by other members of our community. The kind of education Sarah Lawrence believes in and delivers is a real privilege, once reserved for a small group of privileged people. It is an education that empowers and opens up real possibilities for making a difference in the

world. If we are not careful, we run the risk that the preparation for leadership our doors open will be restricted, once again, to a small and privileged group.

It is therefore imperative that we and other selective colleges make extraordinary efforts to become more inclusive in our selection of students, in our awards of financial aid and in opening our campuses to a population diverse in all possible ways. We must make the campus a safe place for everyone, where bigotry is not tolerated and where we can learn from each other by engaging one another in real ways—not because it is politically correct to do so but because it is humanly correct. The leadership of the country must reflect the diversity of our society, or we will breed leaders out of touch with the people they serve. Bigotry and fear have no place here.

Upon the recommendation of the dean of studies and the Committee on Student Life, we have created the new position of director of diversity and community engagement. We are now searching for a director who will advise stu-

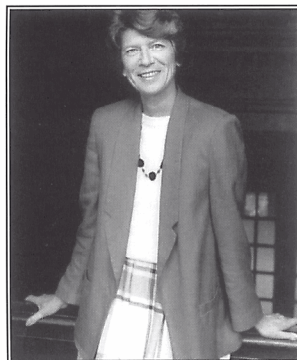
dent-identity organizations and support multicultural programming; organize and facilitate dialogue groups around issues of race, ethnicity and exclusion; provide support for students in dealing with issues related to prejudice on campus; chair a standing committee, composed of faculty, students and staff, that will meet regularly to discuss issues of race on campus and to advocate for students' needs. The new director will be a member of the Committee on Student Life and make regular reports to the committee.

My hope is that we will not stop here today. Fears that fuel hatreds do not die. The fight must go on. And we must search for better ways to build a community where we are respectful of our differences, compassionate, courageous, open to each other.

Let's get smarter and learn something today. Let's keep learning—and let's make sure that learning mobilizes us to act.

*For more about the day, see pages 4 and 5.*

*Michele Myers*



Our beloved Priscilla Hawkins, secretary of the College and special assistant to the president, died on August 8, 2004. Priscilla came to Sarah Lawrence in 1976 as director of administrative services, responsible for managing human resources. Over her nearly 30-year tenure she stepped in to play a significant role in numerous areas across the College, including admission, college resources and financial aid. Priscilla was an invaluable source of wise counsel and support for me and for my predecessors Charles DeCarlo and Alice Ilchman, and for the Board of Trustees. Her remarkable mind was a repository of almost three decades of College history and knowledge. She was a woman of generosity and grace, of virtue and wit, of humor and compassion. We will always remember her sense of justice and equity, her mastery of critical detail and precise writing, her intuitiveness, her sense of the strategic, her integrity and, above all, her deep understanding of and devotion to the College. Our lives at Sarah Lawrence are diminished by this loss of a great woman who was a friend to us all.

—Michele Tolela Myers