

BUILDING BRIDGES TO THE COMMUNITY

By Dr. Jim Fuller and Dr. Michael G. Cartwright

Mary E. Busch '62



Her warm smile greets visitors to her office at the University of Indianapolis and she soon puts them at ease. With her friendly and professional manner, Dr. Mary Busch makes you feel welcome in her role as the Director of the Bridge Scholars Program, a collaboration with selected schools in the city of Indianapolis. Watching her display her skills in interacting with people at the university, one soon comes to realize why she is so widely respected in Indianapolis as a community and educational leader. This is someone who knows how to bring people together, someone who knows how to build bridges to community.

Dr. Mary Busch considers herself a Hoosier. She was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, but her family moved to Indianapolis when she was very young and she has lived there ever since. In fact, she still lives in the family home. Such roots are important to understanding why and how she became a leader in education. She is a part of the city, of the community, and her efforts are not just an investment in support of some abstract ideal. Instead, Mary works for change in the world in which she lives. Her father served as a minister in the Apostolic Church, while her mother worked as a beautician and they had five children, all girls. Mary remembers coming to the realization that her “father wasn’t really all ours,” but that she and her sisters had to share him with others because of his position. Sometimes, she struggled with not always having him there. Eventually, her father sat his children down and explained his role as a minister to them. He said “he was doing God’s work” by “helping people who desperately needed him.” In her early life, then, Mary saw a living example of service, as her father gave back to the community.

She went to school in Indianapolis Public Schools, eventually graduating from Crispus Attucks High School. She earned a scholarship to Indiana Central College and began college as a commuter student. When she arrived on campus in the fall of 1958, she discovered that she was one of only a few African-American students. Indeed, there was little diversity at the college, where the student body was predominantly white, Protestant, and from Indiana. Mary found that some students at the school at that time “were not always accepting” of her and overall she found “a lack of hospitality.” In addition to being black, she was also a commuter, which added to her loneliness. Not living on campus made it even more difficult to make friends and feel a part of things. Racism and a bias against students living off campus made it difficult to fit in at Indiana Central College in the early 1960s.

Photo: Dr. Mary Busch used with permission of the Office of Publications/Media Relations at the University of Indianapolis.

Feeling somewhat disconnected and alienated, Mary threw herself into her studies. Focusing on the future enabled her to get through that lonely educational journey. She wanted to be a teacher, something that she “just knew” that she wanted to do, and college was essential to her dreams. At that time, the young African-American student was not aware of the Indiana Central motto, “Education for Service,” nor did she see it being practiced in any focused way. Despite the cool reception she experienced, she did find a few bright spots in her time at Indiana Central. One of those was sociology professor Marvin Henricks. She remembers that he always “went the extra mile” to help her and he became a positive influence on her as he did for so many other students as well.

Upon her graduation in 1962, Mary went to work teaching the third grade in Indianapolis Public Schools. She also found time to continue her education by pursuing a Master’s degree in counseling at Butler University and, eventually, her doctorate in the field of education from Indiana University.

She also became active in the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans in the city of Indianapolis. The push for equality for African Americans had taken great strides in the 1950s, following the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned racial segregation. By the time Mary left Indiana Central in 1962, the movement was reaching its peak, with marches on Washington and significant national legislation being planned. But the young teacher did not get involved at the top levels of some reform organization. That was not her way. Instead, she worked in the local community, at the grass-roots level.

A friend got her involved in activism, partly through persuasive argument, mostly by setting an example of standing up for causes. Mary worked to register voters, helped feed the hungry, and volunteering on behalf of a variety of educational reforms. She shared the activism of a generation of civil rights advocates and sought to bring change at the local level, where she lived. This sort of

participation marked the experience of most of those individuals who fought for change in the Civil Rights movement. While some became famous for their leadership and others joined them in highly visible actions, the majority worked long and hard in their own communities, where their unheralded efforts made social reform possible.

Mary worked long and hard in the field of education and it is there that one finds her most important contributions. The young teacher soon became an Assistant Principal and her political activities included working for long-time Congressman Andy Jacobs for a couple of years. Then, in 1977, she returned to Indiana Central as Director of Community Services and taught classes in the School of Education. The return to her alma mater followed closely on the heels of another new position. In 1976, Mary Busch was elected to the school board for Indianapolis Public Schools. The courts ordered the desegregation of the schools in the early 1970s and the work of implementing that order brought new challenges and exciting possibilities. As the work of integrating the schools began, complete with plans for busing students to suburban campuses, community activist Tom Binford proposed a plan for withstanding legal appeals and public resistance to the desegregation order. He formed the Alliance for Better Schools and pushed for a school board that would carry out the legal order. Mary ran for the board as part of the Alliance ticket and won the seat that she still holds today.

She knew firsthand the difficulties raised by desegregation. In 1968, she had been one of the first black teachers to work in a white school in Indianapolis. Part of a gradual plan for desegregation, this move also helped fulfill the demands of earlier court orders that had been largely ignored for many years. Her experience as a member of the first integrated faculty at School #93 was a positive one for Mary, despite her initial fears. She “felt so welcomed” and found that it was a “good experience.” Eight years later, she found herself on the School Board and it seemed that she had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. The new Board was charged with integrating the stu-

dent bodies of Indianapolis Public Schools. Mary and the other members of the Alliance fought hard for two-way busing, a plan that would have brought white students from the suburbs to the inner city. But one-way busing won the day, with only black students bused to suburban schools.

Busing was a controversial policy that tore many communities apart. Boston, Massachusetts, became the scene of violent protests and racial tension, as whites resisted the order to integrate the schools via busing. To ease the tension and make the transition as smooth as possible, the School Board and other leaders held a series of community meetings. These public forums allowed citizens to voice their concerns and express their fears. White and black citizens were afraid of what might happen and Mary joined her colleagues in addressing real and imagined worries. Looking back at the plan today, now that court-ordered busing is coming to an end, Mary thinks that it was a very good idea to integrate the staff first. This transition allowed teachers to make friends and connections, enabling them to enlist the help of whites in the suburbs when it came time for busing. While many parents initially opposed the policy, over time, most came to accept it.

While she does not hesitate to point out problems with the system that she helped to create, Mary’s final assessment of the desegregation order is a positive one. She believes that the community has a “responsibility to put students into real-world situations” and busing brought blacks and whites together in schools in ways that allowed them to experience the kinds of interactions they face in the adult world. In the long run, then, the increased diversity of the student population was a good thing. Today, Mary sees the end of desegregation and worries about what it will mean. Already schools are becoming more segregated and, without the legal requirements demanding integration, it seems that they will become even more racially separated in the coming years. Yet, school officials did all that they could.

The courts set the percentages at 85% white, 15% black, and the suburban schools reached those numbers. That those percentages will remain seems unlikely, but Mary finds hope in the work of politicians like Mayor Bart Peterson. From Mary Busch's perspective, the mayor has been more collaborative than previous leaders and seems genuine in his efforts to work with school officials rather than against them. Other organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, also seem more willing to work closely with the schools than they were in the past.

Beyond race, Mary's work as a member of Indianapolis Public Schools Board has revolved around perennial issues like funding. Money is always a problem in education and this is especially true for Indianapolis Public Schools, where inner city poverty plagues the district's ability to raise revenue. Taxation is always a difficult question. Raising taxes too high drives away the residents and businesses the community needs for economic stability and prosperity. But, without taxes, it is impossible to fund the schools. Property taxes are the traditional source of revenue for public schools in Indiana and recent issues like reassessment directly affects educational leaders and their plans. One recent example is the idea for full-day kindergarten, a plan that Mary believes is vital for Indiana. But finding the money to pay for it makes it hard to make the change. Another difficulty is helping the state legislature to understand that the problem is much deeper than an annual budget, but is rooted in poverty.

Another big question is the closing of schools, which is always a sensitive issue. People invest themselves in schools and the local campus becomes an important center of community and social life. When economic realities force the closing of a school, people react emotionally and resist what seems to be an attack on them personally. Other problems arise when there are changes in curriculum. Although Indiana has avoided some of the more controversial changes that have plagued other commu-

nities, such as evolution and creation in science, textbook adoption is always a matter of concern. Mary fought for and continues to support a multicultural curriculum, especially in the matter of textbooks. She believes that children should "see themselves in textbooks" and in adopting books and other areas, she believes the schools should "embrace and celebrate diversity."

Even as she worked for reform as a member of the School Board for the greater part of the past three decades, Mary also worked for change at her *alma mater*. She has seen a lot of progress, but still thinks that the school has work to do. There are "still a lot of students who are not used to blacks in the classroom." As a teacher, she has helped to change many individual minds in that regard and she is convinced that hospitality and access must become a reality for minority students if the school wants to live up to its ideals. While she experienced racism firsthand on the campus in the early 1960s, she is pleased that her work as an educator at the university has been very positive. She appreciated former President Jerry Israel's efforts on behalf of diversity at the university. Mary hopes that the school will continue to be open and diverse and truly will make everyone feel welcome.

One of her most recent contributions at the University of Indianapolis is a continuation of how Mary works for change in the local arena. She serves as Director of the Bridge Scholars Program, which was part of a Lilly Endowment challenge grant. Funded for its first five years under that grant, the program is designed to help students make the transition from high school to college. In one sense, this means "a lot of hand holding," as Mary's office works to help students through their first year at UIndy. Personal counseling and serving as an advocate for students needing a voice complement grade reports, tutoring, and advising.

Always the professional, Mary is clear-eyed in her assessment of the Bridge Program and is quick to point out its failures as well as its successes. But for those individual students who have been a part of it, the program has had a profound impact

on their college experience. The program requires the cooperation not only of university faculty, staff, and administrators, but also the help of high school principals, teachers, and counselors. Mary built upon her own relationships to forge new connections for the university. Friendships forged in her years as a teacher, administrator, and School Board member gave her access to schools that few others from the university could have reached.

In her recent work at the university, then, Mary Busch literally built a "bridge" to the Indianapolis community. In many ways, the Bridge Scholars' Program symbolizes the kind of service that she has contributed over the years. She brings people together and works for change at the local level. She strives for realistic goals and judges her achievements with a critical eye. Never satisfied with what she has done, Mary refuses to rest on her laurels and is always looking to the next task, always finding something else that needs to be done.

Dr. Busch defines service as "giving back to the community without being fully compensated." She thinks that people are motivated to serve because it "feels good" and they really "want to make a difference." Mary tells today's students, "Don't squander your time. Take advantage of opportunities." She wishes more students would realize that "people care and are here to help you." She urges them to remember that, "you only go around once. All we're asking for is four or five years. There's so much to do . . . don't waste time . . . don't procrastinate." Mary Busch works to change lives by building bridges to the Indianapolis community. Literally thousands of individuals have been influenced directly or indirectly by her efforts. Talking with her in the comfortable confines of the university, one is struck by the realization that, like her father to his family, Mary is not ours alone. We share her with others in the city of Indianapolis because her vocation is to build bridges to the community.