

Speakers: U.S. far from colorblind

By Mike Bush / Journal Staff Writer

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A town hall meeting on race, language and culture in America, moderated by Harvard Law Professor Charles Ogletree Jr. and promoted as the highlight of the big educational conference underway in Albuquerque, got off to a rocky start Friday, when many in the audience could not hear the moderator.

Apparently, the microphones had been calibrated to work for a KNME-TV sound system, not for the in-house participating audience. The PBS station plans to air the discussion at 7 p.m. Thursday.

Albuquerque Public Schools Superintendent Winston Brooks stopped the discussion shortly after it began – already a half-hour late – until a compatible sound system was provided.

Brooks said the conversation at the conference of the Council of the Great City Schools was “much more important than PBS getting its one-hour tape.” Once the event finally got going, the conversation was often riveting, as the superintendents, school board members, administrators and a few Albuquerque high school students fielded questions or provided their own comments and observations.

Ogletree noted early on that his four granddaughters “grew up in the time of Obama” and therefore have a different perspective than he does.

In addition, his wife began reading to their son when he was still in the womb. That sort of attentiveness to education is clearly not the norm, particularly for children of color.

He also noted that the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to sit on the high court, had observed about the Brown vs. Board of Education decisions in 1954 and '55 that their mandate to end segregation in public schools was to be implemented “with all deliberate speed.” But, Marshall added, “all deliberate speed” means no speed at all.”

The result is, Ogletree told the 200 or so people in the audience, that today the country has more homelessness, more unemployed and more people in prison than it did 50 years ago. And many of those are people of color.

“There is still a divide between us and them, the haves and the have-nots,” he said. “And it is enormous.”

Three developments compound the racial discussion, he said:



Charles Ogletree, a Harvard Law School professor, moderates a town hall meeting on race and culture Friday as part of an educational conference in Albuquerque. (Dean Hanson/Albuquerque Journal)

- Because of the election and re-election of President Obama, people think the country has reached colorblind status.
- Every day, 4,700 young people drop out of high school.
- During the era of racial segregation, the nation – particularly the South – had an inordinate number of African-American teachers. Today, because of Brown vs. Board of Education, that number has dropped considerably.

Part of the problem facing educators, said Valeria Silva, superintendent of the St. Paul, Minn., public schools, is that every child is an individual, but the schools teach as a group. Kids walk into school and figuratively have to put on a mask to participate. “Our kids see color, our kids feel color every day, when they walk into the classroom or the supermarket,” she said.

Later in the discussion, Silva, an immigrant from Chile, said she “was white until I was 24 years old. I was privileged. When I came to America, I discovered I was a person of color.”

A black male superintendent said race, for him, has always been an impediment. The problem, he said, is that the nation doesn’t celebrate race or view it in a positive light, but uses it only to categorize people.

He recounted an incident when he was 11, being bullied by police in Los Angeles. But he had been counseled by his father on how to react – or not react. Such an experience is common to black men, he said, and is reinforced every day.