

White Supremacist by the Bay

by Sharon Martinas

MY THROAT LUMPED AS I HEARD MY NAME CALLED. I'D never spoken before at a public hearing of the San Francisco Board of Education. I don't have children in the school system. I'm neither a parent or a teacher. And I hadn't studied the Houghton-Mifflin history and social studies textbooks that were the center of the storm of controversy. Yet I felt compelled to speak.

A coalition of thirty-seven community organizations, composed mostly of people of color, had severely criticized the books as racist and Eurocentric, destructive to the educational growth and self image of children of color. They had documented their criticisms in a meticulously prepared, 85 page critique. What could I say that hadn't been said before? I decided just to share my own experiences:

"My name is Sharon Martinas. I'm 55, of European ancestry and I've lived in San Francisco for 27 years.

"I am speaking in opposition to adoption of the textbooks. I believe that they are very detrimental to the development of children whose heritage, like mine, is European.

"Let me explain what I mean by some examples from my own life. Forty years ago, I went to one of the best public schools in Boston. There I learned about Greeks and Romans, but not about Egyptians and Mayans. I learned that Columbus discovered America; that the Constitution made all Americans free and equal; and that Mozart was a musical genius, but Coltrane, merely an improviser. Nothing in my education at a prestigious Ivy League college changed that image.

"My formal education had so diminished my humanity that, although I was a person who cared deeply for my fellow human beings, the scope of my care was limited to those whose skin color resembled mine, and whose ancestors came from Europe. Other human beings — those with darker skins, whose ancestors come from Africa, the Americas, Asia, or the Middle East — they didn't exist for me.

"In sum, I had learned to be a literate, capable, generous adult who was at the same time a white supremacist! No, I didn't wear



What's Happening to the

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white sheets or burn fiery crosses. I just thought and acted like an ordinary white American.

"For example, when I moved to San Francisco, I rented a lovely flat overlooking the Bay. It never occurred to me, because I hadn't been taught, that the land on which I was living had once been under the stewardship of the Ohlone peoples for whom that land was sacred: it could not be bought, sold or rented. Nor did I know that white settlers who came here generations before me, had exterminated the Ohlones and stolen their land. And that is how I came to enjoy my lovely apartment.

"I didn't begin to restore my humanity until I participated in the strike at San Francisco State that created the School of Ethnic Studies in 1969. That struggle inspired a new vision of multicultural education for this nation.



"But that vision cannot wait for college. It has to start when a child enters public school. Not much has changed since I went to school 40 years ago. True, the educational canvas is no longer painted with an all white brush. But the cloth is still white. It just has a few black, brown, red and yellow polka dots to adorn it.

"This new canvas, exemplified by these textbooks, is just as destructive of our children's humanity as was the old one. Our nation's school systems are still churning out young white supremacists faster than a Ford assembly line turns out pick up trucks.

Children?, by *Laura Irene Wayne*

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"And so, I call on the Board of Education to exercise your ~~responsi-~~ bility for nurturing the humanity of our children. Reject these textbooks. Find or create books that tell the truth.

"Let us all learn from the pedagogic wisdom of the ancient Egyptians, an African people, who said, "Know ye the truth and the truth will set you free."

I guess the Board didn't like Egyptian proverbs. They adopted the textbooks with one dissenting vote. Only Tom Ammiano, a white gay community activist and the newest Board member, said no to white supremacy.

I wish more of San Francisco's huge white progressive community had been there to oppose the textbooks. I don't know if it would have made a difference in the vote. But I believe it would have made a dif-