

Voices of support for...

The faces of affirmative action

by Maya Muir

Affirmative action programs are under attack around the country, most immediately in Washington State, where ballot initiative No. 200 will abolish all state affirmative action programs. Last issue, we looked at reasons to support these programs. Here we hear from several beneficiaries of affirmative action.

Anna Schlecht



Anna Schlecht was a carpenter in the late 1970s when the bottom fell out of the housing market, making competition for contracts intense. "For four months, I had no work," Schlecht remembers. A single mother, Schlecht was desperate.

Along with 150 white male carpenters, she applied for construction work with the city of Olympia. "They had an affirmative action policy on the books which wasn't fully implemented," says Schlecht. "I told them, 'You need to have the ranges of faces in your community working for you.'"

She got the job. Within one year, Schlecht earned a significant promotion, and this year (18 years later) she was chosen as the employee of the year, out of 750.

"As a woman, you have to work twice as hard for half the recognition," she says, "but each day I give the job all I have."

Yvette Fields

The first in her family to go to college, Yvette Fields became depressed in her junior year, unsure what to do after graduation. Then she heard about the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Program, which was designed to interest students of color in graduate school. Although Fields had never considered higher education and competition was fierce, she tried — and won.

The fellowship consists of a program of graduate level classes between the junior and senior years, a letter of support (if grades are good) to participating graduate schools, and tuition support. Fields completed it with flying colors and recently received her Masters

degree from the University of Washington. "I had gifts I didn't know I had," says Fields. "However the process was very competitive. No one gave me a handout. But without this affirmative action program, I wouldn't have gotten this far."

Nat Jackson

Nat Jackson heads a small telecommunications business in Olympia. When he started in 1977, Jackson found that no matter how qualified he was, big companies never considered him for a subcontract. Jackson turned his energy to helping draft a law establishing an Office of Minorities and Women Business Enterprises to help assure equal opportunity in procurement in the state, which was created in 1983. "A door that had been closed was open," says Jackson. "Once opportunity becomes available, you get in on your qualifications."

Before 1983, women and people of color were awarded less than .01 % of contracts; now, Jackson says, the total is closer to 10 %. "There are jobs that I unequivocally wouldn't have gotten before," says Jackson.

What if Proposition 200 passes? "The situation will reverse to the way it was before," says Jackson. "People that vote for it will be taking food off the tables of women and minorities."



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— Nat Jackson