

Becoming America
By Maria Fleming

We hold these truths to be selfevident, that all men are created equal." The opening words of the

Declaration of Independence marked the beginning of our nationhood. And yet they represent a destination, too. For despite this noble principle, the diverse peoples that the new nation comprised were profoundly unequal. Slowly but steadily, however, the sacrifice and persistence of women and men who believed in a principle larger than themselves have inched us closer to realizing our national ideal of equality for all.

Despite the tremendous progress we have made in the last two centuries, there is still a distance left to travel in achieving this ideal; inequities still plague our society. The legally sanctioned segregation of children in schools was struck down by the courts in 1954, yet in many parts of the country we still maintain a dual school system that is divided along the fault lines of race and ethnicity, with African Americans and some ethnic minorities often getting fewer and inferior educational resources.

We have corrected many of the discriminatory aspects of a justice system that allowed some states to deny African Americans the right to practice law, serve on juries and testify in court, and often subjected Black men to the inhumanity of "lynch law." Yet justice is, in many respects, still a Black and White issue in America. African Americans are often subjected to "racial profiling" by some law enforcement agents, who automatically consider Black people suspect because of their skin color alone. Studies also indicate racial bias in the application of the death penalty. Black defendants, for example, are significantly more likely to receive a death sentence than White defendants in capital cases.

The quota system that favored immigrants of European descent over other ethnic groups was finally eliminated in 1965. Nevertheless, our current attitudes and public policies toward some immigrant groups are reminiscent of the strident nativism of the early 1900s.

Civil rights legislation passed in the 1960s and later decades protected most Americans from job discrimination based on an indelible characteristic such as race, gender or disability. As of the year 2000, however, lesbians and gay men in many parts of the country still had no guarantee that they could not be fired from their jobs simply because of their sexual orientation.

These are just a few of the challenges we still face as a pluralistic society struggling to live out our national creed. Moving beyond our country's legacy of bigotry and discrimination requires not only working to bring all of America's diverse groups to the table, but a willingness to sit down at the table together and honestly confront the hard truths of our past; to examine how that painful history has shaped our current public institutions, communities and attitudes; and to negotiate together a more just, more equitable, more harmonious future for all Americans.

Langston Hughes wrote many nowfamous poems in which he expressed his hopes for the United States. In one poem, titled "Let America Be America Again," Hughes calls our nation "The land that never has been yet-/And yet must be." Indeed, our history can be read as our collective attempt to *become* the America described in our founding documents more than zoo years ago. As we continue to advance toward that goal, the lives of the men and women whose stories are told in this volume can serve as roadmaps for the journey.