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COLUMN ONE

Thanking her for opening my eyes

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Charlotte Button

In 1968, Iowa teacher Jane Elliott decided to teach her third-graders a lesson about racism. For an entire day, she conducted her class as if the brown-eyed children were superior to those with blue eyes. In this 1970 photo, the "inferior" students are at the back of the line wearing collars.

An Iowa teacher's 1960s classroom experiment on race changed my life. Now here I was, knocking on her door.

By Corina Knoll
March 26, 2009

Jane Elliott has blue eyes.

The years have turned her once-brown hair a bright snowy white, and at 75 years old she's rounder, maybe shorter, than she used to be. But eye color doesn't change.



Photos: 'Blue Eyes / Brown Eyes'...

Elliott, an Iowa teacher, made deliberate use of that in 1968 when she created a now-famous exercise for her classroom of white third-graders. It was the day after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and she was struggling to explain the concept of racism.

She hit upon an idea: For an entire day, she conducted her class as if the brown-eyed children were superior to those with blue eyes. Elliott eventually made headlines, appeared on "The Tonight Show" and became the subject of multiple documentaries.

Three decades later, my high school sociology teacher played us snippets of a [news program](#) about the "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes" exercise. For a 16-year-old Korean adoptee growing up in Iowa, the most fascinating aspect was this: Elliott had made history in Riceville, two hours from my hometown.

The daughter of white parents, I grew up in a predominantly white city, attended an overwhelmingly white school and interacted mostly with white friends. The subject of race in my community was hidden, buried under rhetoric that insisted we remain

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"colorblind."

Elliott was the first white person I ever heard who admitted to the privileges of whites, acknowledging that visible differences affect how the world perceives us. Her words sparked a hunger in me for more.

My first year in college, I took courses on race and ethnicity and Asian American history. Race, I learned, permeated everything, and it was OK to say so. I found myself with strong opinions and a circle of outspoken black and Asian friends with whom to share. The world felt bigger, and I felt empowered.

Much of my decision to move to Los Angeles eight years ago was to answer a longing to live somewhere diverse. When I discovered Elliott quietly living nearby, it seemed fortuitous that I had become a reporter. I could interview the woman who unknowingly sent me in a new direction.

Now 30 years old, I am standing in front of Elliott's winter home in Sun City, shaking her hand and looking straight into her blue, blue eyes. It is a day to remember: a sea-colored canvas for a sky, streaming sunlight, whispering breeze. And it is one of those moments when fate flashes in your mind and you know you are exactly who and where you are supposed to be.

We sit outside Elliott's home in a gated retirement community. She and her husband, Darald, bought the property 10 years ago to be close to their daughter, who lives in nearby Murrieta. For six months each year, the couple call Riverside County home. The rest of their time is spent in Iowa.

It is late October, five days before the United States elects its first black president, and Elliott is in a dither. Her Iowa absentee ballot in favor of Barack Obama was mailed in weeks ago, although she worries about what he's up against.

"Whatever a black person does, he has to do twice as good as a white person to be thought of as half as good," she says, her sharp voice rising.

Dressed in a pink cotton shirt, jeans and white tennis shoes, Elliott is the picture of a grandmotherly retiree, but her voice remains that of a stern teacher. Obama "mustn't look angry because we have demonized black men," she says. "He knows exactly how to get accepted. He's a bargainer . . . and that's OK if that's what it takes to get white people to listen."

This is how Elliott has made a living. She retired from teaching 20 years ago and lectures a few times a month, primarily at colleges or companies in need of diversity training. She won't say how much she charges, but it's said to be about \$7,000 -- higher if she's asked to conduct her famous exercise. The drill gives her a migraine, and she hates that she must be the proprietor of what she sees as a necessary evil, one that hasn't changed since she first enacted it on April 5, 1968.

With King shot just the day before in Memphis, Elliott encouraged her third-graders to discuss how something so horrible could happen.

"I finally said, 'Do you kids have any idea how it feels to be something other than white in this country?'"

The children shook their heads and said they wanted to learn, so Elliott set the rules. Blue-eyed children must use a cup to drink from the fountain. Blue-eyed children must leave late to lunch and to recess. Blue-eyed children were not to speak to brown-eyed children. Blue-eyed children were troublemakers and slow learners.

Within 15 minutes, Elliott says, she observed her brown-eyed students morph into youthful supremacists and blue-eyed children become uncertain and intimidated.

Brown-eyed children "became domineering and arrogant and judgmental and cool," she says. "And smart! Smart! All of a sudden, disabled readers were reading. I thought, 'This is not possible, this is my imagination.' And I watched bright, blue-eyed kids become stupid and frightened and frustrated and angry and resentful and distrustful. It was absolutely the strangest thing I'd ever experienced."



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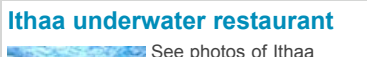
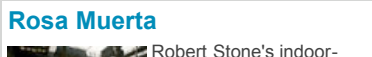
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