April 2011

In a newly published memoir, University of Arizona President emeritus Peter Likins tells the story of his life with his wife, Patricia, and the six children they adopted in the 1960s, tackling complex issues like interracial adoption, mental illness, drug addiction, unwed pregnancy and homosexuality.

Likins, who served from 1997 to 2006 as the UA's 18th president, will hold a reception and sign copies of "A New American Family: A Love Story" from 5-6:30 p.m. Thursday in the UA BookStore at the Student Union Memorial Center. The event is sponsored by the UA Press, the UA Alumni Association, UA BookStores and the Office of the President.

The following is the preface to the book, which carries this dedication: "To the heroine of our story, the love of my life, my wife and the mother of our children, Patricia Likins."

(Read more about his book in the UANews article "An Inspiring Memoir of Triumph.")

When the polls closed on the West Coast on November 4, 2008, and the chorus of political analysts on television announced that Barack Obama had been elected president, I found myself sobbing uncontrollably.

Surprised by my own reaction, I later wondered why I was so moved by this decision of my fellow citizens. I am, after all, an old white guy, seventy-two at the time of the election, a straight, Catholic, former Republican trained as an engineer. John McCain was not only my senator from Arizona, he was then my respected friend. What powerful internal forces had pulled me into the Obama camp, despite all the stereotypes suggested by these labels I wear?

I had fully appreciated the intellectual appeal of Barack Obama’s words in his two books and his many speeches. I agreed with his call for more civil (and civilized) public discourse and his fearless welcome of challenging ideas and ideals. I saw him as transcending the divisions that have polarized American politics, including race as well as party, looking beyond the petty conflicts of the moment to face the complex challenges of the future. But how did this election become for me such an emotional catharsis?
My wife, Pat, and I had raised six adopted kids in our multiracial family, but we had always insisted that we were not trying to change the world; we were only creating a beautiful family. Two of our children, like Barack Obama, were the product of black and white unions; two were Native Americans, one an Anglo child, and one of mixed Hispanic and Germanic American heritage. These racial and ethnic identities had been incidental to our adoptions; each of these children needed a family and we did too.

If race and ethnicity were so unimportant to me, why did I react so emotionally to the election of an African American president in the United States of America?

I have gradually come to understand that my commitment to my family has nurtured and been nurtured by my childhood belief that the ideals of the American democracy would someday be realized, the belief that someday people who look like my children would be accepted as just typical Americans, not set aside as "minorities." I had come to see our brood as a new kind of "all American family," born and raised in a changing America. But I was growing older and the time had not yet arrived when we would be perceived in America as simply Americans. The election of Barack Obama did not yet herald the arrival of that new day, but it made me believe again that my dreams for America and for future families like mine will be realized. Though that new day has not yet arrived, its dawning is now visible on the horizon for those who lift their heads high. The sense of relief in my heart and soul was just overwhelming. My tears were shed not for Barack Obama or even for my family; my tears of joy were shed for my country.

The discovery of that wellspring of emotions might have stayed within me, but something else was happening in my life. In April 2006 I sustained a life-threatening injury that sharpened my awareness of my own morality. After my previously scheduled retirement as president of the University of Arizona at age seventy in July 2006, I felt keenly the need to record for family and friends my impressions of life’s experiences with special focus on family. Over the next two years I created a personal memoir to share my thoughts and feelings, generously illustrated with family photos. That book for family and friends was completed in 2008; I called it "In Darby's Eyes."

In the wake of the Obama election, I thought about the larger societal issues reflected in our experience of raising a multiracial family in America and I began to wonder if there was a story of broader significance to be told. Is America ready to consider the possibility that in the course of the twenty-first century the American family will be a lot like mine?

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