

Martin Luther King Day

City's Biracial Partnerships build bridges, friendships



**CAROLYNE BLOUNT
STAN ENGERMAN**

GUEST ESSAYISTS

In May 2002 Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. established the "Biracial Partnerships for Community Progress" designed to improve racial understanding in the city of Rochester.

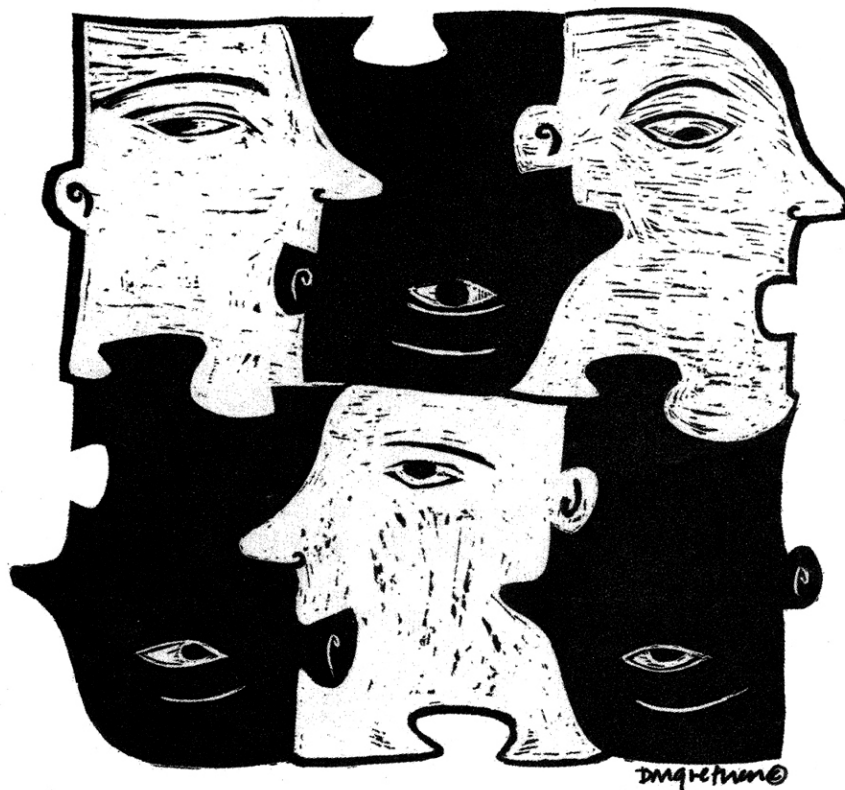
This Martin Luther King Jr. Day is an opportune time to assess how the program has worked, at least for the two of us. We were among the first partners in the program and although we didn't know each other previously, we have remained friends even after our one-year partnership officially ended.

The program is based on proposals by the mayor's Commission on Race and Ethnicity. The biracial pairings were made by a subcommittee with the aim of helping participants "better understand the world-view of a person of a different race or ethnic identity."

Partners were to meet about once a month. The two of us signed up for the program independently. Our meetings have all been over lunch. Although we were provided with suggestions on how to initiate discussions, we were both delighted that conversation at our first meeting and ever after has been easy and continuous.

We talk about issues of race and ethnicity that are reflected in *about ... time* magazine (which Carolyne Blount edits), and *Time on the Cross* (which Stan Engerman co-wrote).

It was clear from the outset that both of us were interested in studying history, particularly African-American history in the United States. That we came



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from rather different backgrounds, in terms of race, religion and geographic origin, did not interfere with our communicating this passion for history, nor prevent us from benefitting from reading what the other had written.

We also discussed and came to understand some similarities of the African-American and Jewish experiences. For example, we talked about the fact that just as African Americans in the late 1800s did not want to discuss the ravages of slavery, neither did Russian Jews want to talk about the pogroms. Both experiences were too painful to air at that time.

However, not all our talk was about historical matters. We each learned a great deal about the other's grandchildren and other family members.

Of the nearly 100 pairings, not all have been as successful in fostering friendships as ours. Several lasted only for one or two meetings, but many more lasted longer. Some, like ours, have continued even after the end of the first stage of Biracial Partnerships.

The program can be regarded as a success in meeting its primary aims, and has benefited the city. It has led to some interracial understanding and although it may seem like a drop in the bucket of improved race relations, it is a very important drop. □

Blount is executive editor, about ... time magazine; Engerman is a professor of economics and history, University of Rochester.