



*Aurora's
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Champion of Diversity

By Tanya Ishikawa

Barbara Shannon-Banister has watched Aurora grow from about a dozen neighborhoods in the early 1980s to more than 450 neighborhoods today. Like a mother nurturing her growing child, she has fostered good relationships between neighbors in her expanding community. And as chief of Aurora's Community Relations Division, it's actually in her job description to integrate a culturally diverse population, eliminate prejudice and head off civil disorder.

"We are no longer Fletcher, the town that was here before it became Aurora," Shannon-Banister says. "When I think of Fletcher, I think of Mayberry on *The Andy Griffith Show*. It was prairie, horses all over the place, the DeLaney Farms. We're no longer Fletcher. We're the third largest city in the state."

She continues, "We are one of most integrated cities in the nation, which means we have a very diverse population. It means people must come to Aurora because we are a welcoming city. We need to keep doing

those things that keep people coming to Aurora."

Although the city's 325,000 people have plenty of elbow room, spread across more than 150 square miles, they often find themselves crowded together on congested highways, in popular shopping areas, and at close to 100 public schools. The diverse mix of cultures is especially noticeable in such places, and Shannon-Banister is charged with ensuring that cultural differences don't lead to confrontations.



Left: Barbara Shannon-Banister receives an award from former Denver First Lady Wilma Webb recognizing the 25th year of Aurora's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday events. Right: People drum along the route of the 2011 "Marade" (march + parade).

WYOMING: CULTURE SHOCK

Born, raised and married in New Orleans, Shannon-Banister came to Aurora after spending 20 years in the much less culturally varied state of Wyoming ("a culture shock—major"). There, she and her husband raised a daughter and a son, both of whom are now doctors, and she earned a bachelor's degree in humanities and fine arts, and a master's degree in education with a minor in energy administration. While searching for a teaching job in the Aurora public schools, she worked for a year as a VISTA volunteer, helping people insulate houses and build solar panels. She also became a volunteer for the Aurora Human Relations Commission, a city-level antidiscrimination group.

"I always had a passion for people who consider themselves disenfranchised and need someone to speak up for them in the areas of housing, employment and other basic rights," she says.

Her city career began in 1982 when a position for a city planner for neighborhood outreach opened up. The job entailed attending meetings of neighborhood and homeowner associations, and helping residents navigate city government and the public-comment process for new developments. Five years later she accepted an offer to head the community relations division as its executive director, the position she has held ever since. Her work has ranged from helping individuals report

discrimination, to a full city-government review and report on discriminatory practices and recommendations for removing them. In her first year on the job she spearheaded the creation of Aurora's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday events, which marked their 25th anniversary in January.

BECOMING A PEARL

Shannon-Banister wasn't satisfied with simply reacting to prejudice and vio-

lence. In 1991, when a group of teens, disturbed by the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police, expressed their anger by vandalizing Buckingham Mall on Havana, the city of Aurora was caught off-guard. The violence erupted within shouting distance of the municipal offices, yet officials were unprepared and unaware. To head off future incidents spurred by social discord, the community relations division

Aurora's Melting Pot

Ten years ago, the 2000 U.S. Census reported that Aurora's population was 68.9 percent white, 19.8 percent Hispanic, 13.4 percent black and 2.2 percent Asian—much more colorful than the state population. In addition, 16.2 percent of Aurora residents were foreign born, and 22.7 percent spoke languages other than English at home, figures that had increased by 2009 to 21.1 percent foreign born and 33.1 percent speaking other languages at home. The 2010 census confirms how Aurora's racial mix has changed: It's now 61.1 percent white, 28.7 percent Hispanic, 15.7 percent black and 4.9 percent Asian.

Youth statistics from Aurora Public Schools are even more striking, showing white students a minority at 23.5 percent, Hispanics at 50.8 percent, blacks at 20.2 percent and Asians at 4.7 percent. The district's 36,967 students come from more than 120 countries and speak 95 languages. In the Cherry Creek school district, which covers a portion of Aurora, the 51,005 students are less diverse, with 62 percent white. *Note: Census figures for racial demographics don't add up to 100 percent, respondents may identify themselves in multiple categories.*

—T.I.

created the Key Community Response Team. Members from various government agencies, businesses and nonprofit organizations meet once a month to discuss issues in the community and organize activities to defuse civil disorder at critical times.

Shannon-Banister's other achievements include the creation and supervision of the Kaleidoscope Aurora Council, the Aurora Community of Faith, and the International Cross-Cultural Network of Aurora. Kaleidoscope's mission is to celebrate diversity through performing arts and cultural-awareness events. (As a leader and participant in choruses and theater groups around Aurora, she's particularly fond of the performing-arts aspect.) The Community of Faith, a gathering of church representatives, helps keep congregations up to date on local happenings and opportunities. The Cross Cultural Network organizes translators and interpreters to assist residents who are English-language learners.

Shannon-Banister is also proud to have been a founder of the Metro Community Provider Network, which operates healthcare clinics for people without insurance. Plus, she oversees the work of the Aurora Veterans' Affairs Commission, recognizing the contributions of the city's many veterans (one third of the population) and active military families, and connecting them to resources. Her long-term goal is to ensure that each organization within her



In January, Shannon-Banister received an honorary doctoral degree from the Denver Seminary.

division remains vital and accessible to Aurora residents.

Her dedication to the belief in diversity's power to enrich lives seems to be topped only by her belief in God as her sustainer. "I know some people feel threatened by cultural diversity, but there is no need," she explains. "There are frictions within cultures, frictions within families, and frictions within churches. Friction is not necessarily bad." Remembering a sermon by internationally broadcast pastor Joel Osteen, she recalled his comment that when friction is applied to sand inside an oyster, it becomes a pearl.

"So maybe friction makes us all into pearls. Don't always think that friction is there to hurt you. Friction is there to help you," Shannon-Banister concludes. "We all make choices on how we respond to people. Whenever someone is getting on my nerves, I could be intimidated, but I choose how I respond. I think, 'Barbara, you're turning into a pearl.'" *

Tanya Ishikawa is a freelance journalist, Web content writer and video producer, and the editor of the Denver Urban Spectrum, a monthly publication spreading news about people of color. Her interests range from independent film and dance to international relations and human rights.

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