



## PALM STREET PERSPECTIVE

SLO CITY, CAL POLY PARTNERS IN DIVERSITY COLLOQUIUM

By SLO City Councilman, John Ashbaugh

**O**N MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6, I WAS HONORED TO BE invited to participate in the Diversity Colloquium at the Performing Arts Center at California Polytechnic State University. This event gathered energetic and enthusiastic faculty, students, and community members under the banner, "Celebrating Diversity."

Our purpose for this Colloquium was expressed in the words of a City Proclamation delivered by Mayor Jan Marx to Cal Poly President Jeffrey Armstrong: "to affirm the on- and off-campus virtues of living and learning in a diverse culture." It was significant that Cal Poly reached out to the larger community, with the City represented by Mayor Marx and myself.

Within the audience of about 800 in the Cohan Center auditorium were a kaleidoscope of ethnicities. Participants included representatives of the Anti-Defamation League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and many other local non-profit organizations.

The colloquium featured a keynote address by Paul Gardullo, curator of the new Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. This facility will begin to rise on a 5-acre site just northeast of the Washington Monument, and is scheduled to open in 2015.

The colloquium also honored Joe Schwartz, a 98-year old folk photographer who lives in Atascadero. Joe was born in 1913 in Brooklyn, and frequently encountered anti-Semitism and racism in the hard streets of Kingsboro. His exquisite black-and-white photography documents the 20th century story of race relations from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s, through the Great Depression, the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s, and into the digital age. Joe's extraordinary body of work will become part of the permanent Smithsonian collection at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The audience at the PAC was spellbound while a slide show presented a collection of Joe's photographs set to the music of Louis Armstrong and other great jazz musicians of the 30s. When it concluded, Joe was given a standing ovation at his seat in the dress circle.

### INCREASING DIVERSITY DEMANDS ATTENTION

My wife and I first moved to San Luis Obispo in 1977. At that time, it would have been impossible to imagine a gathering at Cal Poly to celebrate diversity. The university, and the city as a whole, reflected a demographic pattern that was very white—few minorities among any age cohort, including ours.

The university's enrollment was just beginning to reflect the demographic and policy changes of the 1970s and '80s that would result in a growing multi-cultural presence among both students and staff. Yet change would come slowly and, for many, grudgingly: This was a campus, after all, where the Legislature had excluded women during the '30s and '40s, only permitting women to enroll again in 1956!

Today, enrollment at Cal Poly still does not reflect the state as a whole: White students comprise about 63% of the enrollment, while statewide, whites are only 40% of the population. Latino students at Cal Poly are about 13% of the student body, and African Americans less than 1%; statewide, Latinos are about 37% with African Americans at 6%.

Diversity issues at Cal Poly, and within our larger com-

munity, involve more than just numbers: Students of color often hear racial slurs, and frequently encounter uninformed opinions that imply they are only "allowed" to enroll because of Affirmative Action.

Here's some news for those who give voice to such ignorance: Affirmative action was ended in California many years ago as a result of case law and legislative action. Cal Poly is one of the most selective public universities in the nation, and any student who is admitted has clearly earned their place by demonstrated academic excellence and/or promise.

We can be grateful that this generation of students, FINALLY, is less afflicted by racial bias than those before it. Students and young people today are also more accepting of differing sexual orientation or gender identities, more willing to look beyond the superficial traits of nationality or immigration status. In our increasingly globalized world, these students know that the world they are inheriting is one where what counts is what you—we—can do as individuals to add value to the world.

The organizer of the 2012 Diversity Colloquium was Harvey Levenson of the Graphic Communication Department at Cal Poly. In his own words, Dr. Levenson summed it up: "It is my hope that this event represents an ongoing discussion on the virtues of living and learning in a diverse and inviting community via seminars, workshops, town meetings, discussion groups, and related events on- and off-campus throughout the year and, yes, capped off by an annual conference."

I'm looking forward to next year's colloquium, which will celebrate another year of progress on diversity issues at Cal Poly, and in the city as a whole.

