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Looking back on York's Charrette after 40 years

A West York teacher is conducting an academic study of the Charrette, convened after York's race riots, hoping to place it in its historical context and provide guidance for today.

By MIKE ARGENTO
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A mural at York's Princess Street Center commemorates the Charrette. (file)

Last summer, Sonny Urrunaga, a teacher at West York Area High School, was finishing up work on his master's degree when he had to settle upon a research project.

He wanted to study something local, so he

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choose the York race riots from the 1960s, thinking he would examine the causes of the disturbances and how they relate to race relations to this day. It was a broad topic and one that was certainly open to academic scrutiny.

But as he looked into the riots, he found that they've been fairly heavily studied from a lot of different angles. The one aspect of the riots that hadn't been the subject of a great deal of academic study was the Charrette that followed.

"The Charrette was how York dealt with the aftermath of the riots and disturbances," said Urrunaga, who teaches American political and economic systems at West York. "The Charrette was the first time the York community came together to try to find solutions to some very crucial issues."

Whether it did that or not is still debated. The meeting -- which stretched over eight days and included discussions of everything from police-community relations to housing and health care to education to employment -- had some tangible results. But even now, 40 years after it convened, its impact is open to debate.

On April 19, 1970, leaders from business, government and the community gathered to discuss the problems facing York -- problems that contributed to the race riots of the previous two summers -- in hopes of avoiding a third violent summer. The meetings convened, coincidentally, after three stabbings were

reported at William Penn Senior High School.

Eight days later, the meeting ended. Some tangible results came immediately. The York City School District adopted sensitivity training at one of its elementary schools. Then-District Attorney Harold Fitzkee ordered cards printed in Spanish to advise Hispanic suspects of their rights. A community health center was established. A housing council was created.

Yet, other reforms were slow to come. The Charrette recommended disbanding the controversial K-9 unit of the city police force. The dogs were frequently used to terrorize the black community and had driven a large wedge between blacks and police. Disbanding the unit was seen as a vital step in rebuilding that relationship. The city police did disband the unit -- three years later.

Some in the community believed that while those in charge of the Charrette were sincere, the results were less than spectacular and that it could be viewed as Time magazine put it at the time, an exercise in civic group therapy.

"The results say that," said former York City Councilman Ray Crenshaw. "After a couple of weeks, things were all the same. If you look back at after that, and up until right now, the problems haven't been resolved."

The issues transcend race, Crenshaw said. While race relations have improved greatly, he said, a lot of other problems for all city residents

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remain.

"If you don't have a job and live in poor housing, the economic problems are still there -- and not just for minorities, but for everyone who lives in the city," he said.

From an academic point of view, Urrunaga said the Charrette provided a model, a way to bring a community together to discuss and possibly come up with solutions to vexing social problems.

"The Charrette's significance is how can you take an issue ... and bring people together to propose solutions to major social issues," he said. "The Charrette affected a lot of people of different races and incomes. It addressed broad issues."

Urrunaga is only about a quarter to a third of the way into his work. Right now, he is looking for people who participated in the Charrette to share their memories and discuss the meeting's importance at the time. He hopes to preserve some of those voices as part of an oral history of the Charrette, and that time in York.

He said the Charrette remains vital as it laid the groundwork for current efforts to address serious issues facing York city and York County. It provided the model for such efforts as YorkCounts, seeking to address issues as diverse as crime, jobs, education and economic inequities.

Yet, he said, it is difficult to measure the success of such an effort as results are sometimes only seen in the long-term.

"How do you know that the Charrette has done its job or whether YorkCounts is finished?" he asked.

That's a good question.

ABOUT THE CHARRETTE

The Charrette in York was convened April 19, 1970, and ran for eight days. Members of the community gathered each day to discuss the problems facing York -- everything from education and employment to race and housing -- and try to come up with solutions.

Some believed the well-timed Charrette helped create a climate of change for the next decade. Blacks and women earned many firsts in the 1970s and early 1980s: Frederick D. Holliday became the city's school superintendent, and voters elected Doris Sweeney to the school board. Elizabeth Marshall became the city's first elected female mayor. Thomas Chatman became York's police chief. Roy O. Borom and Wm. Lee Smallwood gained seats on the city council. Bobby Simpson served on the board of York's chamber of commerce. Mattie Chapman earned election as county prothonotary, the county's first black elected official.

--Jim McClure, York Daily Record/Sunday News

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ABOUT THE NAME

"The term derives from the days when French architecture students at L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts used a two-wheeled cart, or charrette, to pick up their design drawings. Sometimes, guided by some final inspiration, they worked hastily en charrette during the trip to the school."

-- *Time magazine*

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