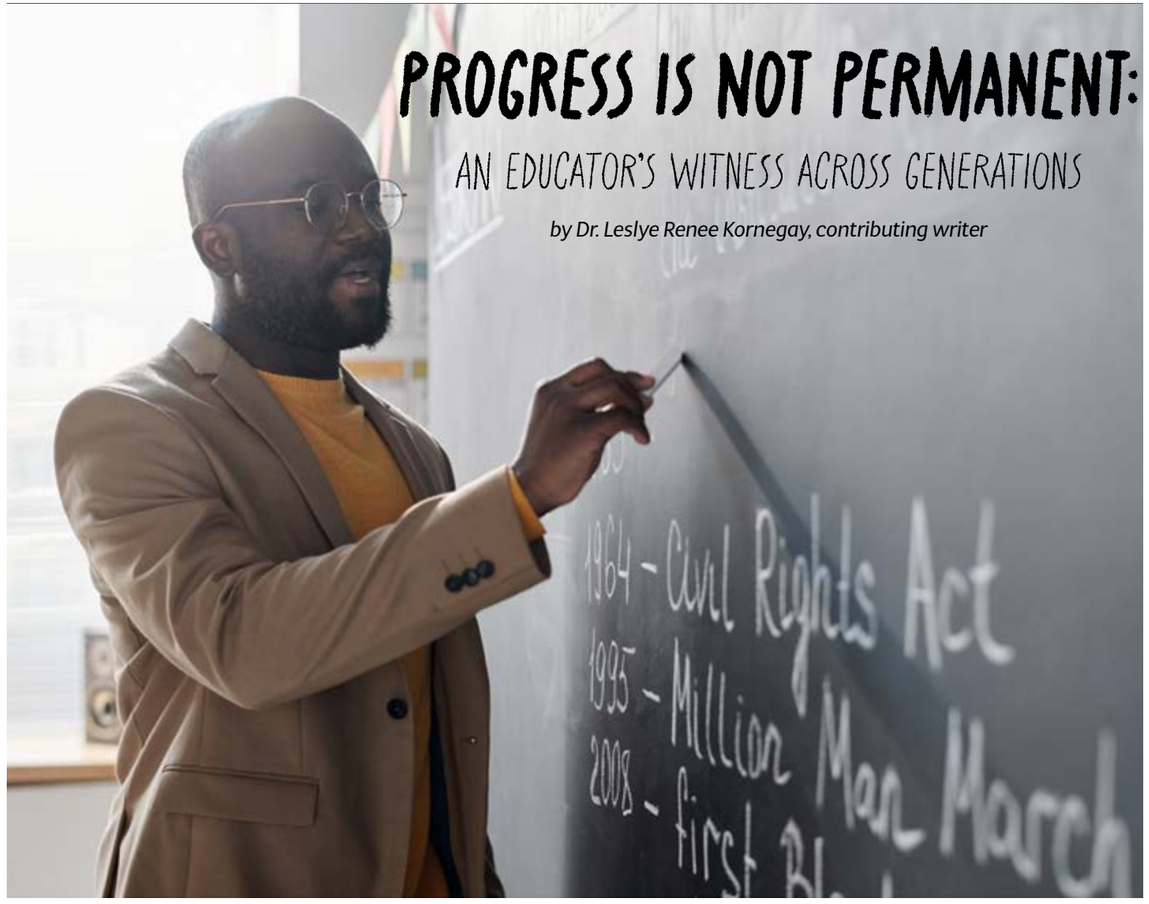

PROGRESS IS NOT PERMANENT:

AN EDUCATOR'S WITNESS ACROSS GENERATIONS

by Dr. Leslye Renee Kornegay, contributing writer

"If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name.

If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own — which it is — and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber.

For if they come for you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

— James Baldwin, 1963

I was four years old when these words were written. I did not yet understand their urgency, but I have spent my lifetime growing into their truth.

At four, I was learning how to read, how to trust the adults around me, how to believe that institutions, schools especially, were places of safety and truth. Baldwin, meanwhile, was speaking to a nation at a crossroads, warning that moral failure rarely arrives announced. It begins quietly, with denial, delay, and indifference.

Progress does not vanish overnight. It erodes quietly through silence, softened language, and the steady normalization of exclusion.

I grew up during a period when the United States told itself a hopeful story. Civil rights legislation reshaped access to education. Women entered professional and leadership spaces once closed to them. In my lifetime, I watched doors open that had long been sealed shut. Like many others, I believed reasonably that while the work was unfinished, the direction was forward.

Education, in particular, felt like protected ground. A place where truth would be preserved, where history would be taught honestly, and where progress would be guarded by inquiry and courage. That belief did not disappear. But it was tested.

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As I moved into leadership roles often as the only Black woman in the room, I came to understand that progress often carries conditions. In "Leading to Change the World: One Black Woman's Journey into Positions of Leadership in Predominantly White Institutions," I write about navigating spaces that welcomed my presence but resisted my authority. Spaces that praised resilience while withholding protection. Spaces where excellence was expected, but advocacy was treated as inconvenience.

Visibility is not the same as safety. Inclusion is not the same as power.

What shaped me most were not moments of open conflict, but moments of quiet accommodation. Meetings where decisions affecting marginalized communities were made without their voices present. Policies framed as neutral that consistently constrained the same people. Conversations about equity that stalled the moment discomfort entered the room.

Over time, I learned that institutions rarely see themselves as unjust. Instead, they come to accept inequity as operational reality.

This is the danger Baldwin warned us about. When harm becomes procedural, it becomes defensible. And when it is defensible, it becomes repeatable.

In recent years, I have watched a broader cultural retrenchment take shape — one marked by skepticism toward complexity and nostalgia for a past that excluded more than it included. In education, this has appeared through challenges to curriculum, pressures on academic freedom, and increasing insistence that educators avoid "controversial" truths in favor of comfort. These efforts are often framed as balance, neutrality, or tradition. Their impact, however, is anything but neutral.

Education is never neutral. What we teach, omit, or soften becomes the inheritance we leave behind.

As an educational leader, I have felt these tensions personally. I have been asked sometimes directly, often subtly, to choose between honesty and harmony. To protect institutional calm rather than institutional conscience. I have watched how often the burden of restraint falls on those already navigating disproportionate risk.

Over time, I came to understand that neutrality in education is a myth. Every policy decision, curricular choice, and leadership silence communicates values. Institutions do not drift toward justice; they are guided there by people willing to remember, name, and act.

Baldwin's words endure because they refuse distance. They remind us that injustice is never isolated, and that what is permitted to happen to one group establishes precedent for others. The corridors he described are not relics of history. They are rebuilt whenever fear replaces conscience and order is prioritized over humanity.

Progress requires guardians. Rights require memory. Leadership requires courage.

I speak now not as a historian, but as a witness. I have lived long enough to see gains expanded and later questioned, rights secured and later narrowed, truths taught and later softened. The pattern is not identical, but it is unmistakable.

Education remains one of the most consequential sites of this struggle. It can preserve truth, or it can quietly reshape it. It can prepare students to lead with courage, or train them to mistake silence for professionalism.

I did not write my book as a victory narrative. I wrote it as testimony. As a reminder that leadership is not defined by title, but by what one is willing to defend when doing so is costly.

Progress is not permanent. But neither is retreat inevitable. What endures — what always has — is what we choose to stand for.

The question before us now is not whether progress can be lost, it can. The question is whether educators and leaders will recognize themselves as its guardians.

Education will not safeguard truth by accident. It will do so only if those entrusted with it are willing to remember honestly, teach courageously, and lead with moral clarity when neutrality feels easier. History does not ask us to predict the future. It asks us to decide what we will allow to be inherited.Standing still has never been neutral.

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Dr. Leslye Kornegay is an inspiring executive leader, educator, and author. Currently, she is an executive director at Duke University. Additionally, she serves as faculty in Langston University's School of Business and Champlain College Graduate College. With 40 years of experience in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and 30 years in senior leadership roles in PWIs within higher education, Dr. Kornegay exemplifies resilience and dedication. A lifelong learner, she embarked on her educational journey at Mount Olive University, graduating in 1999 with a BS in Business and Organizational Development. She furthered her studies with an MSA from Central Michigan University, and earned her Doctor of Education in Leadership from the University of Vermont in 2012. Leslye's passionate research highlights the experiences of Black women in leadership. She is the proud author of Leading to Change the World: One Black Women's Journey into Positions of Leadership in PWIs, set to inspire readers with its release in September 2024. As the founder and CEO of The Kornegay Foundation, a nonprofit philanthropic organization, and Kornegay Konsulting, LLC, she is committed to empowering others and leading change.
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