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Be proud of the progress since riots

By Nick Vehr

It's impossible to be excited about now without thinking about then.

It was 2001. I can't help but recall my emotions. Anger and confusion. Mostly confusion. I went to Central Parkway just to see the police line - CPD's finest in bulletproof vests and helmets holding clear plastic shields. Not far away, mostly young men with skin much darker than mine, clearly on the other side.

I sat in New Prospect Baptist Church that night confused. I suppose I was seeking to understand. Pastor Damon Lynch is a friend - he must understand; he'll explain. The church was more hectic than busy. When I left, Damon asked a young man to walk with me to my car, just in case. I was even more confused.

For years, before and since, I worked with others to make Cincinnati better - on task forces, commissions, committees, in public office and on nonprofit boards.

Before, such work was fulfilling, exciting, although ploddingly purposeful and Cincinnati-nice.

Since, such work has been more focused, more energized and challenging - and, yes, many times more frustrating, but markedly more fulfilling.

The difference for everyone, I think, was the seriousness of it all; that we had to seek to never again be fearful of our differences and to not be confused - to never again see a police line on Central Parkway!

It is 2009. Emotions run just as strong, but they're different. Happiness and pride. Mostly pride - and that, I think, makes us happier.

This past summer we hosted the NAACP Annual Convention. Every contemporary civil rights leader was here. They actually applauded our police department when it ended, in addition to saying great things about Cincinnati.

The Progressive National Baptist Convention also held its annual meeting here this summer. This, the largest convention of primarily African-Americans in the country, was a smashing success.

Cincinnati was just awarded the 2012 World Choir Games, a very prestigious global competition that will be the largest event in Cincinnati's history. About 20,000 musicians from 90 nations and as many as 250,000 visitors will come. No American city before us has ever hosted this event.

This weekend, the Cincinnati Reds and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center were chosen to play host to Major League Baseball's Civil Rights Game. And Bill Cosby, Hank Aaron and Muhammad Ali were selected to be honored. Right here! In Cincinnati! In 2009!

This past week, I interviewed a young Ohio college graduate for a job who is from neither Cincinnati

nor Ohio. She decided she wanted to start her career in Cincinnati, though, because of its reputation for being a welcoming and great town for young professionals. Yeah, that's right!

It is so much easier for me to appreciate 2009 when I think back to 2001. We must acknowledge real progress. We can never dare to think the job is done. But, we can feel immense pride at the progress we've made.

We're all on a journey, whether as a city or as individuals. The only certainty in that journey is where we have been - we can see it clearly, sometimes painfully, but always clearly.

I pray that we always learn from our journey. What we learn influences our choices going forward. I think we've learned as a city. I think we're making better choices.

This weekend is another step in our journey. We're taking that step more together than we've ever been and we are better for it. I am excited for where we are headed as a city.

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