

# The Post and Courier

## A chance to listen to others

By Ken Burger  
The Post and Courier  
Tuesday, July 28, 2009

The arrest last week of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his Massachusetts home generated heated conversations all across America.

People of color say the incident is an outrageous example of police profiling, while others say it was an unfortunate escalation of egos.

Fact is, a black man was accused of burglarizing his own home by a white police officer who had reason to assume a crime was in progress. What followed was indignation run amok.

The distinguished Ivy League educator apparently became enraged at being stereotyped, and the police officer ramped up his aggression when his orders were disobeyed. It was a recipe for disaster.

What started as a burning local issue quickly boiled over when President Barack Obama, the professor's friend, denounced the police on national television.

### **Anecdotal America**

In the wake of the media frenzy surrounding the incident, the average American is left to sort through the emotional aftermath and make sense of the reality.

Who better to ask, therefore, than the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization you think would be leading the protest against police injustice and for minority rights?

But you might be surprised to hear the even-handed comments of Victoria Middleton, executive director of the ACLU's S.C. National Office in Charleston.

"I think it is an opportunity to reflect on the assumptions people make," Middleton said Monday. "I would like to see the conversation go beyond the personal interaction to looking at how profiling may be institutionalized."

Middleton, who is not a lawyer but served in our nation's foreign service and holds a doctorate in English literature, says the real issue is the disproportionate numbers when it comes to people of color in our prisons.

"We really need to look at statistics and not these striking anecdotes," she said. "The impact of all this on our community is what we should be talking about."

### **Permanent pipeline**

Middleton says her phone often rings with stories about profiling by police. While she knows it happens, she doesn't think it's the key issue.

"I'm sure law enforcement professionals try to ensure their training includes civil liberties," she said. "But there are times when misconceptions and stereotypes and misjudgments occur. But we really need to look at the system that locks up or detains one in 38 South Carolinians."

Middleton says this permanent pipeline of people in prison destroys our communities and costs our state in tax dollars and public safety.

But do we, as a society, learn anything when something like the Gates case explodes and exposes the fault lines in our cultural relationships?

"I really wish people would think about it and talk to their neighbors about it," Middleton said. "Unfortunately, we tend to read the news that reinforces what we already think."

"If we ask around, we just might better understand what the challenges are. It would be great if this incident created an opportunity for listening as well as talking about what we suspect is true."