

## WHAT WILL BE OUR AFRICAN-AMERICAN LEGACY?

Webster defines legacy as “**something handed down to another**”. I want to talk to you about legacies, especially the Negro legacy that was handed down to African-Americans. In order to discuss our African-American legacy, we have to begin with our Negro legacy. Prior to 1960, we were called Negroes. In the forty years before 1960, Negroes in America embarked upon a journey that would culminate in the greatest gains for African-Americans in the history of America.

The Negroes’ burning desires to provide their children and future generations with a quality education, economic parity, social advantages and political equality flourished with the establishment of Negro community newspapers. Negro journalists questioned the unfair plight of the Negro in America and communicated the need for change and action.

During World War II, Negro soldiers fighting in foreign countries also questioned the unfair plight of the Negro and sought to bring about change when they returned home. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown vs the Topeka Kansas Board of Education* struck down the practice of segregated schools by declaring that “**separate but equal**” was unconstitutional.

Change was in the air. Negroes were on the move. They wanted more for themselves, their children and their futures. Negroes were building a legacy. America was headed for a showdown with destiny and we would be the beneficiaries. This Negro legacy would come with an enormous price tag.

The decade of the sixties was filled with changes: freedom rides, civil rights marches, student boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins, voter registration drives, and Negro students demonstrating extraordinary courage by enrolling in all white schools, colleges and universities including some from Turner High School.

People of all races, religious backgrounds and gender gave their lives - children in a Birmingham church, college students in a Mississippi river, a mother killed by a car bomb, and civil rights leaders killed by bombs and bullets, so that the children of my generation and future generations would have greater educational, economic, political and social opportunities.

From 1960 to the late nineties, African-Americans were gifted with their greatest educational, economic, political and social opportunities in the history of this country. Amid the changes and opportunities, the Negro identify changed to Black and then African- American.

In 1960, the graduating class of 1964 entered Henry McNeal Turner High School as eight graders. I enrolled a year later. We were wide-eyed, curious and a little afraid. The little that most of us knew about the United States was changing.

Because of the new educational, economic, political and social opportunities given to us, members of the 1964 graduation class would entered professions and gain employment in jobs that had long been denied to Blacks in education, politics, finance, airline industry, law enforcement, public safety, computer technology, media industry, engineering and construction,

armed forces, as well as, blue and white collar jobs in retail, hotel, the food industry, entertainment, sports and all of the other service related jobs.

Employment in these jobs coupled with a major increase in small business ownership came at a price that was paid by previous generations of Negroes.

African-Americans, the beneficiaries of the Negro legacy have not treasured and honored that legacy. Instead of maintaining and building on the Negro legacy, we have lost gains paid for with blood, sweat and tears. Look at our education systems. Do any of you honestly believe that African-Americans are as equally active and dedicated as the Negroes?

If so, then why are our families, children and communities in crisis? Where is the urgency in the African-American community to strengthened our families and provide our children with the same or better opportunities that Negroes died for in the sixties? I am asking every Turner High School alumni, what will be the legacy of the African-American generation?

Will it be great public schools and affordable post-secondary institutions that offer courses that meet the needs of current and future employees, employers and entrepreneurs? Or will it be the strengthening of our justice system where every individual is guaranteed equal protection under the law? Or will it be a social system where love not color or gender determines your partner?

Or will it be a medical system where affordable medical care is available to all? Or will it be an economic system where a person is paid an affordable living minimum wage? Or will it be a penal system that no longer stigmatizes and punishes minorities with long mandatory prison sentences for certain drug possessions?

Or will it be a long term and committed comprehensive effort by individuals, religious, civic, social and political groups working together to better understand the new concept of family where mama or daddy is more likely to be a single parent, a grandparent, an adoptive straight or gay parent, a foster parent, an extended family member or a family friend?

Or will it be the resurrection of God in our lives and homes? Whatever, we want our legacy to be we need to start working on it PDQ and that means pretty damn quick!

We may ask what can we do at this late date to make sure that we will be able to leave a legacy that will provide current and future students the opportunities that were given to us? We can start by becoming engaged in our community, local, State and National governments.

We can start by participating in the lives of the people in our community. How smart is it to own a mansion or a home in a community that is losing neighborhood schools, with underachieving schools, increasing student dropout rates and escalating youth crime and gangs? This is happening in our communities now.

We cannot continue to be selfish and uncaring with our financial gains. We must support education with our money and our time. We must support students who have bailed out of the

### 3

education system and who society has given up on. We need retirees to volunteer as readers and teacher assistants in elementary schools.

We need adult African-American men and women to volunteer as big brothers and sisters mentoring to students in elementary, middle and high schools. We need volunteers to work with students to get their GED's. We need volunteers to become neighborhood watchers and call the police or the school when children play hooky.

It truly angers me when I hear senior citizens complaining about paying school taxes. I remind them that generations before them built and maintained the schools that they attended.

It is our duty and responsibility to support our local school systems, whether we have children in them or not, by running for positions on school boards or supporting candidates who possess the experience and fitness for those elective positions. We need each of you to get involved in improving the educational opportunities for students and their quality of life.

We have not been good stewards of the Negro legacy given to us. We need to reclaim that legacy and build on it. We all owe past generations for the price that they paid for us whether we squandered our opportunities or took advantage of them. We owe it to the present and future generations to leave the world a little better for having lived.

No one likes to pay taxes, yet everyone wants topnotch services from their local and county governments such as: well-maintained streets, police, fire and emergency services, code enforcement, health and court services, special services for children, the elderly and the poor; transportation, recreational facilities, well equipped libraries, and social and cultural amenities for our children, and the list goes on.

What we do as a group will determine the level of services that we receive as a group. This also applies to our legacy. The level of educational, economic, political and social opportunities provided to the present and future generations depends on our current commitment to our community, local, state and federal governments. It is our duty and responsibility to support our local and county governments by running for elective office or supporting candidates who possess experience and fitness for those elective positions.

Politics is the most dominant force in all of our lives. Politics determines where we have the freedom to speak and the freedom to pray. Politics determines the quality of the air that we breathe; the food that we eat; the water that we drink; the kinds of schools that our children attend and their curriculum; our quality and type of healthcare; whom we can marry; who can carry guns and where those guns can be carried; when to use deadly force; who receives workforce training and assistance and for how long, immigration policies; the cost of energy; the type and quality of justice handed out by the courts; human and health services; the minimum wage, parole system, child support, and well you get the picture.

The politics governing these actions occur at the State and National levels. Our Negro legacy provided our greatest gains at the state and national levels beginning with the 1964 Civil Rights

4

Act and the Great Society. Today, we are fast losing those gains due to a lack of focus, commitment and unity of purpose.

Here in Georgia, there is a statewide retreat from public education to charter school systems. Instead of supporting Obamacare or the Affordable Care Act for the hundreds of thousands of citizens making \$32,000 and less first the Governor and now the Legislature is denying them access to federal funded insurance for three years.

Instead of laws protecting citizens the state has embraced stand your ground laws that cost unwarranted deaths.

Instead of building more hospitals, Gov. Deal has allowed seven hospitals to close their doors because of politics. These closing will greatly reduce the number of hospital beds causing many patients to be turned away at the remaining hospitals. A shortage of available hospital rooms mean fewer or no available rooms for patients who have subsidized insurance plans such as Medicare and Medicaid.

As you can see, our beliefs and needs are not been addressed on the state and federal levels because there has been a marked decrease in the number of African-Americans serving in elected state and federal positions. Why is this?

One reason why many elected African-Americans are no longer serving in elected state and federal positions is because they were sentenced to serve time as guests of the state and federal governments for being crooks!

The most important reason is a lack of active participation by African-Americans in our communities and cities. People need to see us working to make a positive difference where we live. Elective positions have to cease being a haven for unscrupulous politicians seeking to better themselves at the expense of the public and the public has to be smart enough to weed them out during the election process.

Also, many people who would make great public servants never run for elective office because they do not get the financial or public commitment needed to make a successful run. If African-Americans want to leave a legacy that will improve life for current and future generations, we need to begin now!

President Obama has been appealing to the nation for help in getting a jobs bill passed, to increase the length of time for unemployment assistance, to provide affordable medical care for all Americans, to rebuild our schools and infrastructure, to increase the minimum wage, to stop the onslaught of laws attacking citizens' rights to vote, background checks for all guns sales, and repeal all of the insane stand your ground laws. We have not answered the call.

Where are our voices? Where is our presence on moral Mondays? We need to get involved. There is not a single one us that cannot help.

I asked you earlier whether or not any of you honestly believed that African-Americans are as equally committed and dedicated as the Negroes? Our silence and lack of action speak for us. It is crystal clear that we do not value our Negro legacy and that my friends is shameful.

Our political beliefs will determine our African-American legacy and how we care for each other. The only place to make our political beliefs known is at the **ballot box**. Therefore, it is imperative that we support and vote for candidates who share our beliefs and who will sponsor and vote for legislation supporting our beliefs.

To help you take control of how you select and vote for candidates, I suggest you consider implementing this six step plan called **BELOVE**.

- ✓ **B**- Become knowledgeable about the candidates. Check out the candidates' experience and fitness for the position.
- ✓ **E**-Engage the candidates on the issues. Get information about their platforms and ask specific questions about how they would vote or resolve issues important to you.
- ✓ **L**-Leave your personal biases out of the races-that is forget your petty jealousies, friends, frat brothers, sorority sisters, and family members. You are not marrying the candidate so their physical looks should not matter just as long as they are presentable at the appropriate times.
- ✓ **O**-Offer your support. If you do not want political beliefs contrary to yours passed, then you should be prepared to provide one or more of the following: financial support, telephone solicitations, and door-to-door or mailbox distribution of campaign literature.
- ✓ **V**-Vote and take someone else with you to the polls on Election Day and vote for every category listed on the ballot.
- ✓ **E**-Evaluate the performance of all elected officials representing you and let them know how you feel about their performance whether you voted for them or not.

On May 20, 2014, primary elections will be held for district, state and national positions. I am asking each one of you to become an active participant- get information on every candidate and the issues, contact the candidates and then support your chosen candidates with either your time or money or both.

Do not chose or disqualify any candidate based on race, gender or sexual orientation. We have to have diversity and build coalitions in order to be successful. African-Americans cannot do it alone. Vote for candidates who support your issues period.

Remember, our generation was gifted with a legacy paid for by loss of life, blood and tears. Our legacy will only cost us a few dollars and a few hours. Don't we owe it to the students here today, to our beloved ones, and future generations to provide them with a better and safer world?

Answer the call of President Obama. Unite and speak out now. Contact all of our current elected officials on every level and let them know that they must address our needs and beliefs or pay a hefty price at the polls on May 20<sup>th</sup> and again this coming November.

**6**

It is not too late for African-Americans to earn a pat on our backs from our Negro ancestors for keeping the faith and staying the course. If you are willing to continue the Negro fight, please say HELL YES! Thank you and God bless you.