

Honor the past by preparing for the future

By Emma Jean Ford

To this minority American, an education means everything. It seems that almost everyday of my life, while at home with my parents, the one sentence that echoed through our house more than any other was, "You will get yourself a good education." My father had a seventh grade education and my mother a tenth grade one. My father worked for a lumber company stacking lumber and my mother still works for a factory inspecting chickens. They told me there was no shame in working hard to make a decent living, but with a good education, at least my working conditions would be better.

Sometimes when the pressures of studying were too much, I'd go up the street to visit my grandparents and I'd hear almost the same thing. My grandmother had been a day worker after her children were older. Her education had consisted solely of three months of summer school. There wasn't much more offered in the rural area where she was raised. She was one of nineteen children and her father needed her to help chop cotton. She was never

allowed the education she wanted, but she wanted her grandchildren to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities that were open to them. My grandfather was even worse than my grandmother when it came to preaching about me getting an education. He worked for the railroad long, hard hours, and one of his dreams was to see each of his forty grandchildren have a good education. He hoped we would never have to work the hours he worked to support our families.

It wasn't that they thought education and making a lot of money was the miracle sure all for finding happiness, because even with the lack of education in our family, there were plenty of happy times.

There were lean times. Each year the Honor Society would have it's induction ceremony, and each year I would need a white dress. Well every year I had grown a bit more just out of the one from last year. We couldn't afford a new one that looked the way my folks wanted me to look, so out would come my grandmother's ancient sewing machine. She would work for days getting the dress just right for me to

do my family proud in.

For this minority American, the wonderful opportunities of education opens the door for greater things, like the dental profession. Now that the doors of the dental schools are open to minorities, and all I have to do to be eligible, is study hard and keep my grade point average high, I feel that I have my direction in life. I'll be able to contribute to a small town that sent me on my way to a better life. The people in the small town where I was born, have to drive thirty miles to see the dentist, whereas with one of their own, toothaches will be much shorter. A lot of toothaches can also be avoided with a little preventive dentistry.

It's not that I think minority Americans have had a monopoly on poor educational opportunities in the past, because I know that immigrants of all races have as well. But, in my small part of the world, Sayre, Arkansas and neighboring towns, I plan to make some changes, at least as much as the education I have will allow.

This minority American thanks God everyday for letting me belong to such a strong race. The

generations before me have worked extremely hard to raise themselves and their offsprings from slavery, then from second class citizenship, and now we are still working to combat ignorance. I am very proud to say that their work will not be wasted. I feel that I would be letting down generations of Black people if I did not take advantage of the opportunities that some of them have tried to give me.

All of what I have written is tied together within me as my meaning of educational opportunities and employment opportunities as well. It means being able to leave the world having made my small corner of it a little bit more comfortable and enlightened. It means that my family can sigh with relief that their preaching and prayer were not in vain. That I'll have a workable profession that will give me a decent living and certainly much better hours and conditions than my parents had. It means most of all that my daughters and granddaughters will have a chance at handmade white dresses, if they make Honor Society, but not because we couldn't afford a bought one, because I chose to make it.

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