

# perspectives

by Professor McKinley Burt

## A Most Gifted Healer

That was a very gratifying response to last week's column, "A Dropout Makes Medical History." We are delighted that so many African American students and parents view medicine as a viable and rewarding career.

Though we will top off this week's article with the presentation of one of the most thoroughly trained young black doctors ever (Ben Carson), we do not wish to avoid the significance of a NON-ACADEMIC BACKGROUND like that of "Vivien T. Thomas" who was described last week as "a Louisiana high school graduate who became the top Cardiac Surgical Technician in America." In these times of a highly uncertain education process it is extremely important that there be "more than one road to Rome."

Specifically, it may be necessary to DELAY (and in a few cases FOREGO) the more formal or rigorous aspects of preparation for a highly technical career. It is for this reason that I am elated that the education establishment (Oregon and elsewhere) is belatedly pushing the unique opportunities offered by the COMMUNITY COLLEGE SY STEM--albeit a necessity as the lead time and the financial wherewithal for attaining that vaunted "Workforce 2000" shrink daily. The present modifications suggested for American pedagogy is simply a confrontation with the reality of preparing a highly technical, world competitive, workforce by the turn of the century. We will need a lot of those "Associate Degrees."

This shrinkage of educational assets and opportunities is a fact of life I had to deal with during my teaching stint at Portland State University. Daily

(1971-1981), I dealt with a situation where it was necessary to repackage dreams and aspirations as many of both minority and white students floundered amid the economic and emotional traumas brought on by poverty and/or family disintegration--not to mention sheer academic inadequacy as a result of the instructional and disciplinary disabilities in the elementary and high schools.

Now, we must look at such an impairment of the educational process as not just the burden of an individual instructor, but as a major and general impediment to the nation's parity in a highly technological world. I will return to this theme in weeks to come but, today, let us return to our black medical pioneers. Not yet 40 years of age, Dr. Ben Carson, perhaps the world's most renowned neurosurgeon, has been the subject of many a talk show, documentary or other presentation in recent years. The story of this most remarkable young black physician is best told in a book by Cecil Murphey, "Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story" (Zondervan Books 1990 or Looking Glass Bookstore on S.W. Taylor, Portland). He has been described as "the remarkable man who gives dying children a second chance at life."

There have been other poignant perceptions; "Nicknamed *Gentle Ben* by his colleagues, Carson's calm demeanor defies the stereotype of the arrogant surgeon." And we have this statement by the Rev. Jesse Jackson: "One of Dr. Carson's greatest achievements is his incredible skill in the operating room. But of equal value is the time he spends talking to kids, teaching them how to set goals, how to avoid drugs and other harmful habits,

how to rise above bad family situations, and how to use their God-given abilities to be the very best they can be. He is a model to all the youth of today." The publication, *Black Collegian*, has this to say: "A unique contribution to not only Black history, but also to American history and to the history of science."

This man who in 1987 gained worldwide recognition for his part in the first successful separation of Siamese Twins joined at the back of the head, was raised in inner-city Detroit by a mother with a third-grade education. The determined mother simply overpowered the environment, the lack of motivation, the terrible grades and a pathological temper. As I have often reiterated here, not only our race but the nation and the world is indebted to the perseverance and commitment of the black woman to a degree beyond any compense. Within this context, Benjamin Carson rallied his belief in his own capabilities, and his trust in divine power -- moving from failing grades to the top of his class.

He won a full scholarship to Yale and graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School. AT THE AGE OF 33 HE BECAME DIRECTOR OF PEDIATRIC NEUROSURGERY AT JOHNS HOPKINS HOSPITAL. Ben's wife, Candy, also a Yale graduate, has a master's in business and is an accomplished violinist. They reside with their three children in West Friendship, Maryland and continue to inspire both youth and parents around the world.

More next week including a pioneering African American female physician.

## The Drama Of Black History

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

It is at the close of the month of February each year that many in the nation experience an inexplicable uplift and buoyancy of spirit -- seem surrounded by a sparkling new aura of genial self-image. Being reinforced in who you are for the first time -- or the nth time can do that for you. Hear me!

As a lot of us have learned since school days, *history* is not (and was not) just a boring account of the long dead saints and sinners of a yesteryear, to be stamped upon the unwilling psyche of generations of school children. But, rather, a *living* play or theatre, if you will, where a skillful storyteller is able to raise the curtain on an act or series of acts -- achievement or adventure, comedy or tragedy -- in such a manner that your attention is focused to the extent that you become part of the play.

In the particular instance where we have a race whose past has so often been denied, denigrated or refuted, it should not be surprising that the importance

and impact of Black History Month increases with each passing year. It is ever so critical in an era of disintegrating urban structures and demographics that the essential being and nature of a people be held intact against all the exigencies of a hostile world. The truth and essence of who the African American is lives and shines forth from his history -- in story, ballad, poetry, picture, portrait, elegy, troubador, entertainer, folktale, joke, spiritual and religion.

Each year, here in the "Portland Observer," we strive to draw the curtain even further back to reveal even more of that stage where those who came before us can perform in their superb and seminal way. Writers, authors, musicians, inventors, scientists, teachers/statesmen/women, physicians, politicians, generals, and all others who have moved and shaken this vale of tears. As I said earlier, in the right hands "you become part of the play." Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could identify each of the

point-to-point correspondences between a historical revelation and A SPECIFIC INSPIRED ACT OR ACCOMPLISHMENT THAT WAS BROUGHT ABOUT?

But we do know that there are many such fortunate, even auspicious consequences, don't we? As for myself, I cannot begin to list the many surges of ambition, hope or direction that have resulted from listening to or reading inspirational accounts of Africans and African Americans who have excelled in every field known to man--and against all odds. It is absolutely critical that we continue (and expand) our AFRICAN THEATRE OF HISTORY until all of us, all of our children, and all of the world knows (and can face up to) the documented truth of our heritage.

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## BUSINESS EMPLOYMENT LINE

by James Posey



## Construction Opportunities: Is It An Avenue To Realizing King's Dream

CONTINUED FROM FEBRUARY 19, 1992 ISSUE

BY JAMES POSEY

As mentioned in the last article, opinions expressed in this review of programs are entirely bias and not necessarily supported by current data. Nevertheless I hope it serve to give insights and encourage others to demand from agencies and organizations with resources historically charged with the responsibility of keeping the community informed, to get on their JOB. There is no way to over emphasize the need for creditable, accurate and timely information in a format that we can all understand. We need serious factual data and relevant assessments to make informed decisions about how to best improve our economic well being. Again borrowing from the spiritual context "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free". This is not a mystical notion, but an established imperative vital to our economic salvation. We can thank people like Tony Brown who is willing to call a spade a spade and has the courage to challenge traditional institutions and leaders about their approaches to issues effecting the African American community. He accomplishes this by telling the truth and asking for relevant answers.

After recognizing the sheer number of programs, one wonders why as a community we continue to have such a high rate of unemployment, very few big business interest, and constant small business failures. The answer in part will become increasingly clear as we attempt to inspect and analyze the listed

A similar kind of situation is occurring on the employment side. A minority is a minority. There is no distinction between African Americans, Hispanics and other minority group representation, regardless of their respective numbers in the work force and regardless of their respective numbers in the work force and regardless of their skill level. Related to this, is the perception that if a contractor has hired a significant number of women, which almost invariably turns out to be white women, other employment discrimination sins are forgiven. High paying construction jobs seem to be eluding minority males. For example, even the lower paying jobs such as flagging pays on the average of \$15.00 per hour and may be as high as \$20.00 per hour with added benefits. However even these jobs are typically filled by white women. Examine the pay scale. For fear of painting too rosy a picture, one needs to understand that these flagging jobs are seasonal and have very little career development value except getting your foot in the door. Nevertheless, these are good paying jobs while they last and could make a difference for minority males who are often not able to take advantage of welfare support programs and have limited options of obtaining alternative income. Granted, the wages may not compare to a highly successful drug dealing operation, but they are a damn site better than slaving at McDonalds for \$4.00 an hour. This issue is not about demeaning those who work at McDonalds, because McDonalds is a good company and it's honest work. But, people of color have more than their share of jobs in the lower paying service industry and deserve to make a living wage in the construction industry. And it's not about pitting minorities against white women. It is allocating opportunities and resources based on need and fairness.

Please don't take my word about who is represented in the industry. As program and associated organizations more closely. At this point it would be helpful to describe one specific issue in construction that prevents, to a large degree the participation of African Americans and other minorities. Starting with a program that I am most familiar, let's look a bit at the Oregon Department of the Transportation's Disadvantage Business Program. This program has been around at least since early 1970s. It was established by law under what was then called Surface Transportation Act with the expressed purpose of increasing the number viable minority and women owned businesses in the highway construction industry. While there has been a lot of problems with this programs, in recent years the single most damaging factor has been the 1987 change in the Act that allowed combining of setaside goals. Prior to that time there were two distinct goals, 10 percent for minorities and a negotiated goal for women. Currently the two goals ate combined at 10%. This means that if they chose to, prime contractors could meet their DBE goal exclusively with women. Guess what? Highway construction contractors have in fact been meeting their disadvantage business goals primarily with white women. This is a volatile point which has served to promote conflict between these two groups when in fact they should be working together. What does the white male contractor get out of this arrangement. He in fact will take advantage of the set aside pie you travel around the state and particularly in the Portland Metro area, see if you can disprove my contention that there are very few people of color on construction job sites. In a relative sense there are also very few women with exception of the highly visible construction flagging jobs which are almost exclusively comprised of white women. One would think that the simple answer is to get more prime contractors to hire minority males and women of all races at all levels in the industry. That is true, but don't hold your breath. There is a bigger problem that has to do with how the deck is stacked against powerless people. For example, the federal law that compels contractors to pay higher wages on federal contracts is called the Davis Beacon Act. This law in theory is for all workers employed on federal contracts but has the effect of primarily protecting the wages of skilled workers already in the industry. Guess what the racial and gender make up is of the majority of skilled workers already in the industry? Yes, you guessed it. Believe me, the unions and other conspirators, including federal and state agencies, continue to play an elaborate shell game to maintain this status quo. But, wait there's more. This abysmal employment picture has a direct relationship to the absence of viable minority contractors. One negative circumstance perpetuates the other. If the construction industry included significant numbers of minority contractors then the assumption is that these contractors would most likely hire minority workers at higher wage. Furthermore, it is assumed that these same contractors most likely would contribute in other ways to the economies of their respective ethnic communities. To carry this scenario a little further, these same contractors would demand that unions include people of color and exercise political clout to force other reforms benefiting minority interest

that has shrunk from 10% plus to only 10%. In combining the set aside pie to include both groups a destructive competitive atmosphere has been created and there is an increased incentive to circumvent the intent of the program. Its has become abundantly clear that the majority of the 10% set aside and most of the associated crumbs will not reach minority communities. More than likely it will go to majority contractor's wives, sisters, mothers, girlfriends and concubines (all in the family.) After all, women make up 50% of the population and white females at least 80% of the women in this country. In all fairness to a few white male contractors, some are equally appalled that many white females who are clearly not disadvantaged can and have taken advantage of this program. The same might hold true for some minorities who always seem to come out ahead. The next time you see Senators Hatfield and Packwood and Congressman Wyden and AuCoin ask them why they passed a 1991 transportation bill that would have this effect. I would be surprised if they'd tell you that in contrast to white women, Black people and other minorities are not well informed and exercise little political clout when it counts.

If I haven't made the point yet, please wake up and understand that Black males entering construction after 1987 with exception of a few well placed "TOMS", have been effectively shut out.

throughout the industry. That's how it should be, but right now Blacks and other minorities are not getting into the industry at significant levels as business persons or as employees.

What does this all mean to people of color and the majority culture? Does this mean the majority culture ain't giving up nothing and that people of color are presenting themselves as too powerless to take what rightfully belongs to them? Yes, but this impasse will eventually be disastrous to both groups. And what will be the consequences as the economy continues to falter?

What to do about this?

We know about the federal budget deficit, but before it's too late, we should scream aloud about the human development and economic resource deficit in communities of people of color. We need to work while there is still a little daylight left because the night will surely come. You should write and call your federal and state representatives, local commissioners and officials and ask them, "What's up with this." In my mind, there is a direct relationship between what is cited above and the controversy over the House of Umoja.

It's not that the House of Umoja is without fault, but if the Willamette Week wants to call programs into account, they need to start with the many federal, state, and private sector programs administered primarily by majority culture proponents that waste millions of dollars and perpetuate the need for artificially imagined programs like the House of Umoja. They also need to chastise the motives of corporate funders who go for the quick fix rather than contributing seven fold to meaningful economic actions that get at the heart of the underlying causes for crime and violence in the African American community.

In our next article, there is a lot more to say about the Oregon Department of Transportation's Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program.

## House May Vote on Tax Package Tomorrow

Oregon Congressman Les AuCoin today proposed adding a \$5000 tax credit for first-time homebuyers to the economic recovery plan being written by Congress. In testimony before the House Rules Committee, AuCoin said the tax credit would allow nearly 500,000 families to purchase their first homes, and put thousands of construction workers back on the job

"This credit will make the difference for hundreds of thousands of working families that right now can't afford to buy their own homes. When you start putting families in homes, it creates a ripple effect through the entire economy. First of all, it's a quick way to put nearly half a million construction workers back

on the job across the country," AuCoin told a key House committee.

"If we're really serious about economic growth, and about putting unemployed Americans back to work in good, high-paying jobs, then we must include this tax credit in the economic growth bill we take up tomorrow."

The first-time homebuyers tax credit would apply only to homes purchased between February 1 and the end of this year, jump-starting the sluggish economy this year. "The housing industry has led our economy out of every recession since the Second World War," AuCoin said. "It should be counted on again this year."

AuCoin asked the House Rules Committee for permission to offer the tax credit as an amendment to the economic recovery package tomorrow, because it was not part of the tax package released by the key House tax-writing committee last week. "The tax bill we're voting on tomorrow is a great improvement over the President's package, but we're missing a great opportunity for economic growth if this tax credit for first-time homebuyers isn't included," he said.