

EDITORIAL

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THANK YOU FOR READING THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Practice What We Preach

By HUGH B. PRICE
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

In the month since the murder of twelve high school students and one teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, schools in dozens of communities across the country have been inundated with rumors of some of their students plotting similar murderous acts.

It's even more distressing that some of these rumors have led to the discovery of alleged actual plots and the arrest of students.

Littleton, a suburb of Denver, is typical of many of the communities where these school massacres have either occurred or been threatened: it is middle class and mostly white. Yet, the comfortable circumstances and network of youth programs in Littleton and the other towns proved not nearly enough to prevent these devastating tragedies.

That's one reason they've now provoked an instant search for solutions that in itself threatens to become bewildering.

It's time, some say, to bring the National Rifle Association to its knees and legislate stricter gun controls. It's time, others argue, to hold the television, music, film, internet and video game industries accountable for all the murder and mayhem they transmit, almost with impunity. Still others demand that parents must connect more closely with their kids and, some have urged, be held accountable if their children do wrong.

President Clinton, Congress and the political action committees will do battle over these issues on Capitol Hill.

Meanwhile, I suggest society must probe deeper for answers. For Littleton has exposed some harsh truths about American life that young people wrestle with daily, but that most adults would just as soon forget.

Suburban high schools mimic mainstream America.

Ostracism is rampant in high school, even on college and university campuses. There are cliques of youngsters who hang together and lord it over outsiders. Jocks get the glory and the girls. Nerds get laughed at and seek solace and company on the internet. "Winners" love rubbing salt in the wounds of "losers." Integrated schools are nonetheless segregated inside, with black and Latino students typically stranded in less challenging courses.

According to the distinguished

child psychiatrist, Dr. James Comer, high schools are savagely competitive and hierarchical. Students become obsessed with their status. For those who are different or left out, the stress and distress can be painful.

What fascinates me as I reflect on the anguish suffered by suburban white students is the parallel to the pain endured by minority youngsters, also because of their status.

I don't mean to suggest the experiences are identical—only that there's plenty of angst and pain to go around, and that its very real in every community.

Today, forty-five years after the great 1954 school desegregation decision, Brown vs. Board of Education, supposedly killed off Jim Crow, American society, for all the progress made, is still mired in a thicket of discriminatory practices. Black and Latino youngsters who are taught to play by the rules quickly learn that in many realms of American life, there are still two sets of rules.

Racial profiling by police is rampant on some of the nation's highways and on city streets, as America has learned in the aftermath of the February police shooting of unarmed Amadou Diallo. This unjust practice affects all strata of blacks and Hispanics—young and old, the poor and affluent, those who are drifting in society's mainstream and those who are trying their best to get ahead.

The connection between this reality and the tragedy at Littleton is that these suburban school rampages have underscored what so much of youth violence in the black and Hispanic inner cities would have made clear if White Majority America had been listening:

Intolerance, vulnerability and death do not discriminate.

America's youth see a society that is obsessed with status, with sorting by rank and, yes, by race. They under-

stand only too well that ostracism, racism, anti-Semitism and tribalism are all points along a continuum of intolerance, and that the "isms" on that continuum all entail defining one's own self-worth by demeaning the worth of others. Any "reason" will do.

In their most benign form, these "isms" produce embarrassment and isolation. Taken to extremes, they poison, maim, and destroy families, communities, cultures, peoples, even nations.

We adults need to inculcate in more of our children—and more of ourselves—a greater sense of civic responsibility, to the society and to

the human beings we share it with. We must show them how to reach across the chasms of ignorance and intolerance, across the boundaries of race and religion, poverty and plenty, presumed superiority and subjugation to forge a society based on mutual humanity, mutual respect and mutual aspirations.

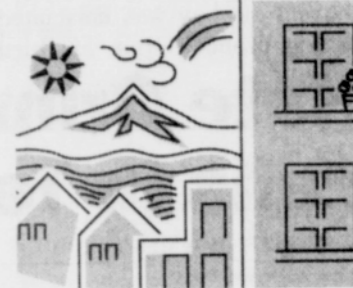
How can we do this? Well, we can start by pledging allegiance with more vigor—and more meaning—to that sacred phrase of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..."

We can start by practicing what we preach.

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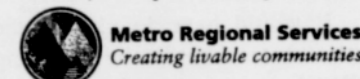
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The committee helps ensure citizen participation in Metro decision-making but does not set policy.

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For more information or to request an application packet, call 797-1539 or send e-mail to mcci@metro.dst.or.us

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When Will It Stop?

By MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Again, a nation has sat before their television sets, transfixed with horror. Again, we ask ourselves why, and how could it happen.

This latest violent episode, again on school grounds, only emphasizes the urgency with which we must address the underlying causes of this and similar tragedies, not only in schools but in our homes and neighborhoods. These killings were not just the work of a student, but of our entire society—a society that tolerates guns and greed, and glorifies violence; a society that values materialism more than morality. Will this be the incident that finally moves us to action, or must more children be robbed of the chance to grow to adulthood?

In the aftermath, I watched, as you did, the faces of the high school students, changed forever by the war America perpetuates against itself. Weeping, or eerily calm, they told stories of seeing classmates shot next to them. Some friends said to me, "why would the news media put these poor children on camera? Haven't they been through enough?"

I thought about that and about the courage it took for these young people to tell their nightmarish stories on national television. If one violent, angry, isolated person who had been thinking of picking up a gun sees, and feels, the pain these children and families

are experiencing and doesn't pick up that all-too-accessible gun, I can only thank God and the child who told his or her story.

You see, I think that is part of the problem. Most of the children in school have said it seemed like a movie; it didn't seem real when it was happening. This kind of horror is accepted in our movies, on our televisions, and in video games—death, depersonalized. Our country was stunned when 12 children and a teacher were killed in one day in one high school, but it doesn't seem to notice that every day in America 13 children die from firearms. Children are safer from gun violence at school than in their homes.

Every day on so many fronts we are stealing from children what should rightfully be theirs—safety, food, shelter, health care, education, and the opportunity to grow into caring and contributing members of society. All children need connectedness and love and the basic physical necessities of life. Not all children are born into families who can supply these basic physical and emotional needs. If we, collectively, don't protect these children, who will? If we don't get the guns off our streets and out of our schools and homes, who will? If we don't ensure that all children receive the health care, basic necessities of life, and education they need in a society where they are protected and nurtured, what will their future be like? What

will the quality of our collective future be like?

A recent study of students in grades 7-12 showed that teenagers who feel "connected" to their schools and families are less likely to engage in risky or violent behavior. This is hardly a surprise. We cannot underestimate the importance of family and teachers, and we must nurture that feeling of "connectedness" very early. The importance of early childhood education, both for academic and social purposes, is crucial. Studies prove that early intervention and education for preschoolers not only sparks a love of learning, but also reduces the likelihood of violent behavior later on.

We must take responsibility for putting into place the resources and bipartisan political support to get our priorities straight, whether we're talking about education, health care, child care, or violence prevention. It's too late for many students, and we grieve deeply for them. Isn't it time we began to learn from our mistakes and not repeat them? There are millions of children who are depending on us—for protection, for guidance, for the basic necessities. Before one more child is lost, we must muster the necessary will to make sure all of our children receive the healthy and fair and safe start in life they require and deserve.

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