



Opinion

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The
Portland
Observer

USPS 959-680

Established 1970

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POSTMASTER:

Send address changes to

Portland Observer
PO Box 3137
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Periodical Postage
paid in Portland, OR

Subscriptions are
\$60.00 per year

DEADLINES
FOR ALL SUBMITTED MATERIALS:

ARTICLES:
Monday by 5 P.M.

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Public education in crisis

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

There's a lot of talk these days about the problems of urban school districts and the inequities of funding available to these districts, but it seems that many have decided that the solution to the public school crisis is a voucher system. Never mind that vouchers never completely cover the cost of private education and that most poor families cannot pay the difference.

Never mind that as we have now entered the Information Age, it is education which will be the key to survival of families. If we simply write off hundreds of thousand of urban (and rural) students, then we can only expect the number of families in poverty and in crisis to increase. We can only expect as well that the numbers in our prison population will increase, we already may incarcerate more than any other nation in the world.

Now make no mistake about it, money without a new paradigm for public education will not solve the problem. There is just such a debate going on right now in Kansas City, where their schools are also in trouble. Some are complaining that while \$2 billion has been spent in the Kansas City school system, that test scores are still low and students are not achieving.

The new paradigm for public education must take into account the students of today. Students who come to school speaking many languages, students who came to school from families in crisis, students who come to school from communities which can offer little support and nurturing. It must find ways to educate parents as well as children, it must provide a holistic education to today's families who face many obstacles.

The new paradigm must take account new role of education in an economy where there are fewer and fewer unskilled jobs and where the agricultural calendar year is less and less important and yet our school years and systems are structured for these past realities. It must prepare computer literate thinkers who can be the workers of the future. The new paradigm must take into account positive contributions of many racial and ethnic groups to our county and must find new ways to develop leaders for the multiracial, multicultural world in which we live. The new paradigm must take into account the enormous peer pressure which young people today face and must find ways of making academic achievement just as "in" as athletic achievement is. The new paradigm must take into account the often-violent world, which our children live in and must work to make schools a safe space.

Only the combination of adequate money and programs which address the new paradigm can ensure that every child in this wealthiest of nations receives quality public education. The funding inequities in public education that exist in nearly half of the states of the nation are a true national security risk. For without quality public education for every child, I shudder to think whether our democracy, which is based on knowledgeable voters and people working for a just wage, can survive.

The lucrative business of minority leadership

By EARL O'FARL HUTCHINSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

The headline in a leading Los Angeles black newspaper gloated "Community Leaders Support New Historic Driving While Black Bill."

There were two things wrong with this. The bill by Black Democratic State Senator Kevin Murray that purported to attack the problem of racial profiling of minorities by law enforcement agencies in California was neither new nor historic. It was a terribly compromised bill that ripped the provision out of an earlier Murray bill mandating that police compile racial stats on unwarranted traffic stops. Most experts agree that this is the only way to tell if police profile black and Latino motorists.

The biggest thing wrong with the headline was that it presumed that the handful of black organizations pictured beneath the headline with names such as Zulu Men, Mothers in Action, African-American Unity Center, Black Agenda, and Black Ministers Conference could speak for all blacks. There was no indication who these groups represent and what their programs are. The arrogance of a handful of amorphous groups claiming to be the exclusive voice for blacks is the big reason many blacks ask, "Where are the black leaders?" "What are they doing for the community?" They are talking about black leaders such as these as well as the NAACP, SCLC, Urban League, CORE, the Brotherhood Crusade, Jesse Jackson's Operation Push, black Democratic politicians, black ministers and celebrity activists.

Many of these leaders are mostly middle-class business and professional persons. Their agenda and top down style of leadership is remote, distant, and often wildly out of step with the needs of poor and working class blacks. They often approach tough public policy issues such as the astronomical black imprisonment rates, the dreary plight of poor black women, black homelessness, black-on-black crime and violence, the drug crisis, gang warfare, and school vouchers, with a strange blend of caution, uncertainty,

and wariness. They keep counsel only with those black ministers, politicians, and professional and business leaders they consider respectable and legitimate and will blindly march in lockstep with their program.

Worst of all, they horribly disfigure black leadership by turning it into a corporate style competitive business in which success is measured by piling up political favors and corporate dollars. The sad thing is that it wasn't always this way. For decades mainstream black organizations such as the NAACP relied on the nickels and dimes of poor and working class blacks for their support. This gave them complete independence and a solid constituency to mount powerful campaigns for jobs, better housing, quality schools, and against police violence and lynching.

The profound shift in the method and style of black leadership began in the 1970s. With the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, the collapse of the traditional civil rights organizations, the destruction and co-optation of militant activist groups, mainstream black leaders, politicians and ministers did a sharp volte face. They quickly defined the black agenda as: starting more and better businesses, grabbing more spots in corporations, universities, and the professions, electing more Democrats, buying bigger and more expensive homes, taking more luxury vacations, and gaining admission into more country clubs.

They launched a frenzied campaign to establish themselves as the leaders of record for African-Americans. Their reward was more business and construction contracts, foundation grants, corporate contributions to their fundraising campaigns, dinners, banquets, scholarship funds and training programs.

Those black leaders who turn leadership into a lucrative business transaction smother new, innovative local leadership, deaden social and political activism in black communities, and deepen cynicism of poor and working class blacks toward black organizations. This is a good business for them but a bad business for blacks.

The struggle for women's equality in black America

By RON DANIELS
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

As we reflect on the extraordinary contributions of African American women in America to the Black freedom struggle and the sustenance of the Black community, it is also important to note that Black women have had to confront and overcome double oppression — racism and sexism. Though there is some evidence that women enjoyed greater status and rights in ancient and traditional African civilizations and societies, in large measure the experience of African women in America has been conditioned by the patriarchal values of the system of male domination operative in Euro-American society.

Generally speaking, for much of the history of Africans in America, the reality is that inside the community Black women worked the fields nursed the children. Prepared the meals and tended to the housekeeping chores with the assumption. That the man was the head of the household/family and leader in the affairs of the community. The role of the Black man was to provide for and protect the family and to take care of his women. The protests of Black men about the highly provocative movie *The Color Purple* notwithstanding, domestic violence against women and incest has been for more prevalent than many in the Black community have been willing to acknowledge.

It is a well known that Black women have most often been the backbone of churches and civic organizations in the Black community, the worker bees that have made Black institutions and organizations viable and effective. For much of our history in the country, however, leadership was seen as a role reserved for men. Hence, Black women often performed the tasks essential to the survival and success of Black institutions and organizations while Black men enjoyed the fruits of their labor by being the leaders.

For years Black women could be teachers and nurses, but being a doctor, dentist, lawyer, scientist, engineer was off limits. Similarly, driving a truck or bus, working on the assembly line in a manufacturing plant or working in the construction industry was taboo. These were considered men's jobs. To the degree that Black women aspired to enter these professions and occupations it was often considered

a threat to the role of the Black man as head of the household. In the church, the idea that women could be a minister was unthinkable.

Obviously much has changed in Black America as it relates to the struggle for women's equality. Indeed, Black women have never been totally subservient within the Black community. Hence the struggle for women's equality in the Black community has been qualitatively different from the struggle White women. Because of the reality of racial oppression however, sometimes Black men have been reluctant to confront and address issues of sexism and gender inequality in the Black community. For some Black men there is a sense that these issues are somehow consumed by the larger struggle for racial equality or the belief that these issues can be deferred until issues of racial oppression have resolved.

During the civil rights and Black Power movements of 60's and 70's, Black women increasingly proclaimed that they would not be confined to the clerical and administrative work and risk their lives as organizers while being excluded from leadership roles. Though the debate and tensions over the issue of gender inequality was inevitably influenced by the "women's liberation movement" framework of the black freedom struggle. While some aspects of the women's liberation movement were decidedly anti-male, by and large, this was/is not the case within the Black freedom struggle or to settle for anything less than the right to fulfill their dreams and aspirations as Black women free of the prejudices, misconceptions and constraints of patriarchy and male domination.

As I argued during the debates leading up to the Million Man March and Day of Absence in 1995, equality, collaboration, cooperation and partnership should be the values, which guide Black male-female relationships, not patriarchy. Being put on a "pedestal" by black men is not a substitute for genuine equality, power and leadership in the Black community. No occupation, no field of endeavor should be viewed as the exclusive preserve of men. Black women and men must be free to fulfill their dreams and free of barriers of race, gender and class. Only when Black women are able to proclaim, "free at last," will the entire race be truly liberated.

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