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Civil Rights USDA: A success story in progress

BY U.S. SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
DAN GLICKMAN

Five years ago, when I became Secretary of Agriculture, I discovered that the department was still struggling—as much of our society still is—to make racial equality an institutionalized and unshakable principle, embedded in every decision and every program.

I immediately made it a top priority to make the U.S. department of Agriculture (USDA) a place where employees, customers and constituents are all treated with the fairness and dignity they deserve. It has been my goal to make USDA a civil rights leader in the federal government. One of our most important steps in that direction was the settlement we reached last year in a class-action suit brought by a group of African-American framers alleging discrimination by USDA. The settlement calls for debt forgiveness and payments to individual plaintiffs who can prove discrimination, even if it occurred as long as 1981. As of April 26, payments totaling \$206.5 million have been made to 4,130 farmers.

As important as the settlement is, our civil rights agenda includes more than reactively making amends for past injustice.

In 1996, I appointed a committee of USDA employees to examine the state of civil rights throughout the department and report back to me with suggested actions. After three months of exhaustive fact-finding, they delivered 92 recommendations covering everything from ways to save minority-owned farms to USDA hiring practices to disciplinary action for civil rights violators.

We have also established a new Office of Outreach, which will help get information about our programs to minority communities

and socially and economically disadvantaged populations.

Often, these communities qualify for USDA assistance without even knowing it. The Office of Outreach will serve as a central repository for information and assistance, helping ensure the fair distribution of USDA resources to people and places that have never before received them.

Internally, almost all USDA employees have now completed some civil rights training, where they learn about the particular sensitivities involved in working with historically underserved communities.

Many supervisors and managers have received additional training, to help them manage the diversity on their staffs. And our agency heads are now evaluated as much on their civil rights performance as any other of their job.

We have introduced accountability, so that those who do not follow civil rights guidelines can expect to bear the consequences. Over the last two years, we have issued 94 disciplinary actions, ranging from letters of reprimand to 14 dismissals. Overhauling an institutional culture is not an overnight job. It will take a sustained commitment and relentless vigilance over an extended period of time.

We have yet to reach the mountaintop, but we have begun the climb.

When Abraham Lincoln signed the legislation creating USDA, he called it the "People's Department," because of its ability to improve the lives of so many different Americans in so many different ways.

With our vigorous civil rights agenda, we are beginning to live up to that name in its fullest sense. The "People's Department" is starting to make good on its obligation to serve all of the people.

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 American 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 job. 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.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

On behalf of the School Board, district staff and the many students attending Portland schools, I write to thank your readers for supporting Portland's local option, Measure 26-2. We had the help of over 1300 volunteers who walked their streets reminding neighbors to vote and made countless reminder, get-out-the-vote phone calls. We also had volunteers appearing before community and civic groups to speak about the local option and what it would mean for Portland students—restoring some of the losses that have occurred over the last ten years and replacing outdated textbooks.

We have many challenges ahead but look forward to the community's continued support for a high quality, accountable Portland school system.

Sincerely,
Debbie Goldberg



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