

Chase & Weil, LLP Salutes Martin Luther King Jr.

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From King

The sobering realities of a dream

BY JAKE THOMAS
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Barack Obama stood before an exuberant crowd of thousands in Hyde Park on a balmy November night in Chicago after having just shattered a glass ceiling that many thought was unbreakable.

Rev. Jesse Jackson, whose generation helped pave the way for the historic event, teared up as the crowd stood captive.

But while a nation built on the backs' of slaves has given a black man its top post, many African Americans are still entangled with same set of problems that confronted previous generations.

Blacks are poorer than their white counterparts, live shorter lives, are more likely to be sick, more likely to be incarcerated, and are more likely to die a violent death.

How is it that more than 40 years after King led a movement that reshaped the contours of the nation's conceptions of justice that these problems seem as deeply entrenched as ever? How is it that the U.S. can elect a black man as president, and produce more black millionaires than any other country, but still have such a large number of African Americans facing such sobering realities?

Historian Cynthia Griggs Fleming attempts to answer these questions in "Yes We Did? From King's Dream to Obama's Promise" (University of Kentucky Press.)

Based on numerous interviews with elected black officials and a sharp awareness of events that sculpted black America, Fleming seems to suggest that there are few genuine black leaders, but, instead, "leading blacks." She points out that the crusade for the improvement of the lives of African Americans has always been far from monolithic.

Before King's name had become a household name, there was a genuine disagreement among those seeking to address the plight of African Americans.

Booker T. Washington, a noted educator and college administrator who preceded King, called on blacks to accommodate whites while working toward their self betterment. Others, like W.E.B. Du Bois, took a markedly different approach, calling blacks to challenge whites on all grounds.

After King's death in 1968, the civil rights movement was left fragmented, and many of the fault lines in black American became more pronounced, according to Fleming. And as a new generation of African American leaders won elective office, they found themselves confronted with an unexpected set of realities that further divorced them from the conditions of ordinary blacks.

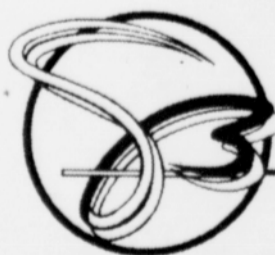
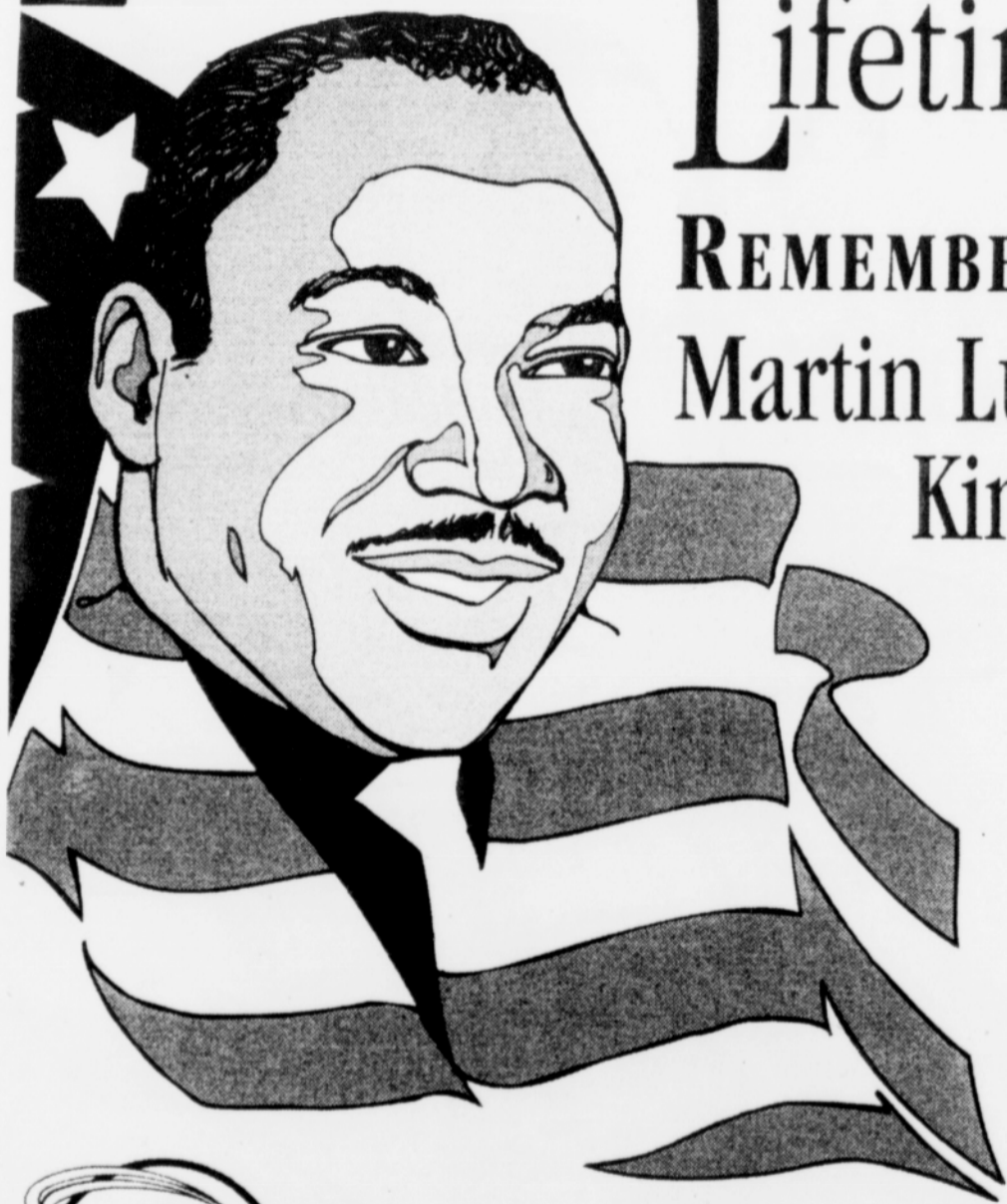
The extensive interviews with black elected officials, which include former Senator Carol Moseley Braun and Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, reveal that many worry that if they fight for social programs and other initiatives directly relevant to their black constituents they will appear irrelevant with their less-sympathetic white colleagues, causing them to lose political clout and campaign funds.

Fleming also notes that the media has a tendency to identify "leaders" in the African American community, many of whom have thin connections to the actual community, further exacerbating the phenomenon.

Of particular interest, is the chapter on the generational divide between older African American, which includes prominent people in business and politics, and the "hip hop generation", whom Fleming suggests, are apolitical, chauvinistic, and almost entirely centered on the quickly accumulating ad flaunting wealth.

While, "Yes We Did?" provides an interesting narrative of the development of black leadership in the U.S., it seems in-

Experiences For A Lifetime REMEMBERING Martin Luther King, Jr.



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