Remembering the Artist Varnette Honeywood

Child Watch

Marian Wright Edelman

Artist Varnette Honeywood had a clear vision of how she perceived Black people and families and a gift for sharing her joyful, colorful perspective with the rest of the world. Her paintings became familiar to fans everywhere after several of them, including "Birthday," were featured in the Huxtables' home on The Cosby Show. She was a dear friend to the Children's Defense Fund and the illustrator and creator of our beautiful logo for the Black Community Crusade for Children's Leave No Child Behind® movement. Her death in September at age 59 was a sad loss for all of us.

Varnette grew up in Los Angeles, where her parents, who had migrated from Mississippi and Louisiana, were both elementary school teachers. She remembered that she and her beloved sister Stephanie would often help them test art projects they had designed for their students. Her parents nurtured her childhood talent, and Varnette started taking art classes at age 12. As an undergraduate at Spelman College, my alma mater, she originally planned to study history and become a teacher like her parents, but her drawing teacher and fellow students who saw her early work strongly encouraged her to change her major. She graduated with a degree in art in 1972.

After Spelman, Varnette returned to Los Angeles, where she got a master's degree in education from the University of Southern California and began working as an art teacher and developed what became her signature artistic style of simple silhouettes and bold colors. Just as important as her innovative style was her choice of subjects. At a time when many other Black artists were depicting poverty or struggle in their work, Varnette often chose family themes or portrayed church or community gatherings. She was deeply influenced by her own close family and childhood summers she spent with her extended family in Mississippi and her art showed loving, vibrant, joyful, and positive scenes from Black life.

In the mid-1970s, she and her sister Stephanie founded their own distribution company, Black Lifestyles, that featured Varnette's work on posters, prints, and notecards. Fellow Spelman alumna Camille Cosby and husband Bill began collecting her work after seeing one of her sets of cards. When Bill Cosby had the opportunity to help choose artwork for the set of The Cosby Show, he knew the look and feel of Varnette's paintings would be a perfect fit. They partnered again when she created the artwork for his children's book series Little Bill, which became an award-winning animated television show. The Little Bill series again showcased Varnette's signature talent for depicting a positive, loving Black family. Creating these kinds of images for Black children was always a deliberate goal in her work.

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As an art teacher in Los Angeles, Varnette worked in a juvenile detention program and designed a multicultural arts curriculum for use in the public schools. She understood the power positive images could have on children's self-esteem and development. When the Children's Defense Fund's Black Community Crusade for Children was launched, we wanted to convey the ideas of love, warmth, family, unity, and community caring for children that represented our mission. She was the first and obvious choice to create the logo. The gorgeous result, Leave No Child Behind, shows four sets of strong Black adults of all shades, each standing behind and firmly and protectively embracing a beautiful Black child's shoulders—a gesture of loving protection and guidance.

Varnette also created posters for CDF's teen pregnancy prevention campaign and Beat the Odds® awards program and charged not one penny. Although she was one of the nation's most prominent Black artists, she was always a caring mentor and generous friend who never lost her original calling to teach and reach back to help others. She used her gift to uplift and inspire other people. I am so grateful for Varnette Honeywood's life and all of the beauty and joy she leaves behind in her work.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information, go to www.childrensdefense.org.

Mid-Term Elections Are Important for African-Americans

U.S. Representative

John Lewis

The upcoming midterm elections have been the focus of all of the political pundits. With control of the U.S. House of Representatives in question, there is a rising concern that the lack of voter turnout among Democrats will undermine the new policies that have been instituted in the past couple of years and undo measures like "The Affordable Healthcare Act," "The Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act" and "The Credit Card Holders' Bill of Rights." All of which are reforms that protect working, middle-class Americans.

> We are affected the most by the policies that come out of Washington.

There is also a concern that the energy of the extreme right is unstoppable. That those who want to privatize Social Security, repeal the healthcare law, and continue tax breaks for the wealthiest 2% in this country have mobilized and are gearing up for a fight. However, what is even more disturbing is that a great number of African-Americans may fail to turn out and vote in the November election.

I say disturbing because if anyone has a reason to get out and vote it is the African-American community. We do not have the luxury of being able to sit idly by and allow others to make decisions for us. We must realize that we have a stake in what happens with this election. We are affected the most by the policies that come out of Washington. Make no mistake and be very clear, there is an effort to reverse all of the progress that we have made during the Civil Rights Movement. There are some who want to eliminate certain provisions of the Civil Rights' and Voting Rights' Acts, and even repeal the 14th Amendment, gut the Fair Housing Act, and abolish the Department of Education. This, at a time when our children are dropping out of school at a rate that is nearly reaching epidemic proportions. This is not acceptable.

Therefore, we must make a decision, who do we want to be as a people or a nation? Do we want to go back or do we want to move forward? Do we want to erase the steps that we struggled to take in the 60s? We have suffered too long and struggled too hard to turn back now. Too many people were beaten and jailed too many lives have been lost.

> Do we want to go back or do we want to move forward?

As one who almost died on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama for the right to vote, I urge you not to be silent, but to stand up, rise-up, and exercise your right to vote. It is not only your right but your duty to those who sacrificed so much to afford you this precious, almost sacred right.

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