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Opinion

The Civic Obligation of Young Black Leaders

Who would have thought that in less than 15 days, I would have to coordinate and manage 1,000 young, Black student leaders from over 24 cities on 17 buses in the name of gun reform and safety?

The reality is, sometimes the work chooses you.

I started my new job one day before the mass school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. We've got over 650 active and registered NAACP chapters on high school and college campuses across the country. We are the only organization, period, that can reach that many Black, young, organized members.

Since February 14, 2018, the day of the Parkland shooting, I have followed these students who have built a national discussion on the safety of young people at school in less than a month. A movement that inspires, convicts and recruits people from across the country and now the world, to an issue that Black folks have been talking about for over a decade.

When gun violence happens in white communities, it's always reported on as a mental issue or because they were racist. When gun vio-

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lence happens in the Black community, it is because of poverty, underfunded schools, police brutality or gangs. This is necessary to understand because the solution we are fighting for can't just be regulations against automatic military style weapons.

“Black students have the solutions and the answers

It has to be a holistic solution to make all communities safe.

The March for Our Lives is only a march for OUR lives if people meet at the intersection of mass school shootings, community violence, poverty, the War on Drugs, police brutality and White supremacy. From Trayvon Martin to Stephon Clark, this is not the first time we've raised the issues of gun violence, but for

many reasons, this moment is where we find ourselves with the most leverage of “people power.”

When the opportunity presented itself for us to be involved and bring our members, I spoke with my boss and told him I would only sign up to help build for the “March for Our Lives,” if we got to do two things:

First, I wanted to make sure that we weren't just being used as representation at the march, but that we challenged the mainstream media, march organizers and organizational partners to think about the intersection of gun violence, when it comes to the Black community.

Second, it was important that this moment not turn into just another rally, but real opportunity for us to educate and engage future members about the organization.

Because a rally won't end gun violence, I want my peers and young adults to make the clear connection from this issue to who should be held accountable for systemic and legislative change at the ballot box. That way, we know we showed up in numbers not just for a great rally, but for the start of a great revolution.

It is my belief, that if all of the young folks from this

march, the women's march, the immigration movement and Black Lives Matter joined together for a strategic effort, we could change this country literally overnight.

We must use this as a moment to help young Black folks see that if we want real gun reform, if we want better public schools, if we want community policing then we MUST show up to the ballot box. This demonstration, for the NAACP Youth and College Division is not a free trip to a rally. It is the moment that we are using to build real power that will impact the political navigation of this country.

Black students have the solutions and the answers. We're going to stop asking to be included in national movements, and just take over.

I am grateful to all of the staff, the partners and our donors who have helped make this vision possible. We can only use this moment to create bigger and better local victories for our people.

Cheers to the strong and fearless students from every community, who have ever stood up to violence in their communities. This march is a celebration of your leadership, and a call to action for those looking to change the world.

Race Trumps Everything in Maternal Health Care

Most people of color can point to at least one moment when they realize that popular culture in America distorts the reality of their history and existence.

The most memorable experience for me was when I was in the sixth-grade in my segregated public school in Virginia. One of our courses was Virginia history and the state had provided us with the required history textbook. Somewhere between the covers of that book was a picture of a group of smiling, dancing enslaved African Americans being observed by a small group of amused white people – presumably the owner and his family. The text explained that most slaves were happy with their condition and prospered under the kindly supervision of their masters.

Fortunately, my sixth-grade teacher was having none of it. He had us open our books to that page and told us that we were being fed lies so that white people could remain in power in the state. He explained that truths were being kept from us because knowledge is power. It is the power to improve your life.

There are so many lies in American popular culture, beginning with the moment we're born – in the maternity ward. Several studies demon-

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strate that racism in America kills Black expectant mothers and their newborn babies, but popular culture tells us that they are receiving the best health care.

“The United States ranks 61st in maternal health, 42nd in children's well-being

A New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene 2016 report titled “Severe Maternal Morbidity in New York City, 2008–2012” put it this way:

“Black non-Latina women with at least a college degree had higher SMM [Severe Maternal Morbidity] rates than women of other race/ethnicities who never graduated high school.”

The National Center for Biotechnology Information published a paper in 2016 that

states:

“Racism and racial discrimination in the USA is thought to be a major driver of the differences between birth outcomes among different racial and ethnic groups, particularly between Black women and women of other races.”

The Centers for Disease Control found that during 2011 to 2013, there were 12.7 deaths per 100,000 live births for white women within a year of giving birth. But for Black women, the rate of death was almost four times higher at 43.5 deaths per 100,000 live births.

While few popular media outlets have focused on this problem, Newsweek magazine published an article in 2016 that reported:

“The shameful secret is that even when controlling for age, socioeconomic status and education, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that African-American women, ... face a nearly four times higher risk of death from pregnancy complications than white women. In parts of the U.S. with high concentrations of women of color who live in poverty, such as Mississippi, maternal death rates can surpass those of sub-Saharan Africa.”

Despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary, partic-

ularly in the area of maternal health for Black women, the popular thinking is that U.S. health care is the best in the world.

In 2015, Time magazine, MSNBC, CBS, CNN and other news outlets reported that the nonprofit organization Save The Children, in its annual report, ranked the United States as 33rd among 179 nations in the world for quality of life for women and children. That ranking was based upon an overall score that took into account mothers' and children's health, educational, economic and political status. What these news outlets did not report is that the United States ranks 61st in maternal health, 42nd in children's well-being and 89th when it comes to the political status of women.

The high infant and maternal mortality among Black women and babies is masked by the low numbers among more affluent Americans. For example, Save Our Children points to a 2011 study that revealed that infants in Washington D.C.'s Ward 8, where half of all children live in poverty, died at a rate more than 10 times higher than the death rate of infants born in Ward 3, the richest part of the city.

Read the rest of this commentary at
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