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OPINION

The real issue

THE BLACK Vietnam veteran looked hurt and bewildered as he addressed the aldermen Monday night before a packed gallery. "I really don't understand what's going on," he said. "This doesn't make any sense."

Indeed it didn't. Ostensibly at issue was what to name the new coliseum. The real issue, however, was what *not* to name the yet-to-be-built structure.

And heading the list of what not to name the arena, so far as one group of white veterans was concerned, was the Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

Given the fervor with which they argued their points, you would have thought Joel was a numbers runner or a child molester.

What he really was, was an honest-to-goodness hero in a time, said a white Joel supporter, when most of our heroes are created in Hollywood.

All Joel did was receive the Congressional Medal of Honor -- our nation's highest military award -- for saving the lives of at least 13 comrades amid enemy fire and tending to 50 others while wounded himself twice in the legs.

Of course, Joel, who died in 1984, also was black, and regardless of his sacrifices, that was reason enough, for some, not to name the coliseum in his honor.

We have argued the logic of naming the arena for Joel, the only Winston-Salem native to win the Medal of Honor, many times in this column, so we won't repeat those arguments now. We will, however, take this time and space to react to what we saw Monday night.

We saw some of the same white veterans who have privately said they don't want the building named "for a nigger," claim to be colorblind.

We also saw at least two of them claim to speak for Joel, as his mother and widow looked on, and contend, with more gall than we thought existed, that Joel himself would not have wanted the coliseum named for him.

We heard the white veterans who oppose the Joel name try to belittle the magnitude of what Joel did, and tell their own war stories in a pitiful effort to rival his acts of bravery. "We're all heroes," said one of them. Not after Monday night, you're not.

We saw the aldermen play political patty cakes with the issue, some changing their stances as many as three times.

Even Alderman Virginia K. Newell, sponsor of the Joel resolution, wavered on the matter, proposing to send it to the Convention Center and Coliseum Commission for further study. But she changed her mind when fellow Alderman Vivian H. Burke criticized the proposal for what it was -- a needless political maneuver. Whenever white people want something, she said, it's acted on. When black people want something, white people say, "Wait."

Fortunately, we saw a vast majority of the citizens, black and white, who addressed the aldermen Monday night support the Joel Coliseum name and restore at least some of our faith in this city.

Unfortunately, West Ward Alderman Robert Northington called for no consideration when a favorable action on the matter seemed imminent, so the issue will be taken up again by the board at its Feb. 17 meeting.

Like the Vietnam veteran, we are hurt and bewildered. You hear rhetoric constantly in this community of how far we've come and how all citizens should work together -- especially when the powers that be need black votes.

If Lawrence Joel had been white, we seriously doubt if there would have been a controversy, and we know, as one of the speakers said Monday night, that black people wouldn't have opposed the move.

As it is, we still have to struggle for what is fair and just.

Make your voice heard on Feb. 17. The aldermen meet at 7:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers on the second floor of City Hall. Some of them claim they want additional citizen input.

Let them have it.

Robeson remembered

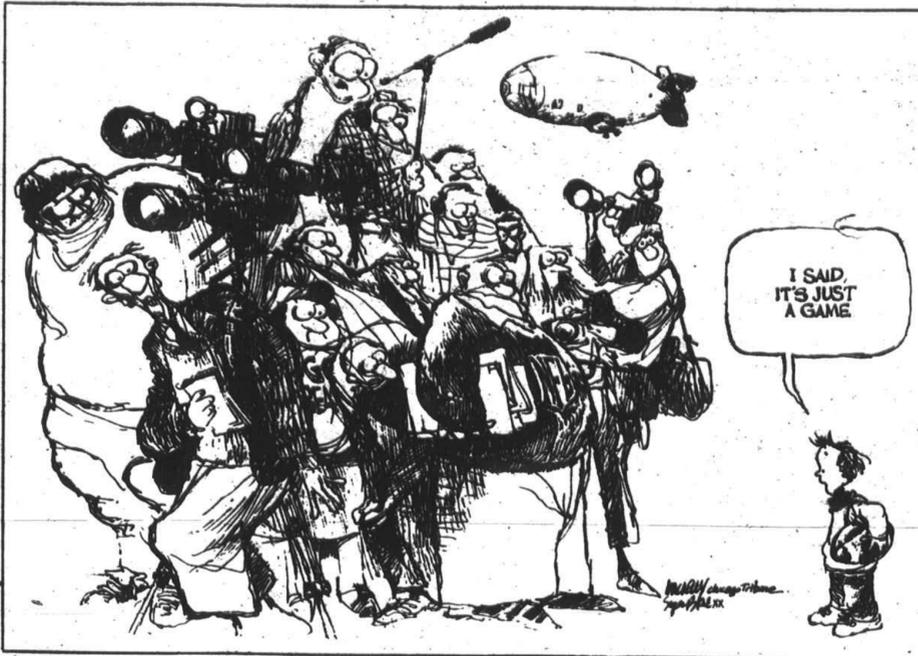
PAUL ROBESON was a big man, both literally and figuratively.

Born in Princeton, N.J., in 1898, he was a singer, writer, athlete, lawyer, orator and scholar.

As only the third black student admitted to a New Jersey state college, Robeson earned honors both in the classroom and outside of it. He was the outstanding member of Rutgers' Class of 1919, won 12 letters in sports and was an all-America football player.

He received a degree from Columbia Law School. He enjoyed a brilliant stage and film career in such productions as "Othello," "The Emperor Jones" and "Show Boat." (Othello played for 296 performances, a Shakespearean record.)

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CHILDWATCH

Four profiles, four struggles

By MARIAN W. EDELMAN
Syndicated Columnist

WASHINGTON -- Aletha Harris worries every month whether she will be able to afford enough food for herself and her four children. Many months, she runs out.

Even when she has the money for groceries, Aletha must walk the five miles from her home to the nearest grocery store to buy them. Although she works full time, Aletha survives only with the help of her church and her friends.

In November, Aletha and several others who are struggling with the day-to-day crisis of poverty came to Washington, D.C., to testify before the House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. Their stories tell us, more clearly and eloquently than any report or study, what it means to be poor or near-poor in America today.

For Tweedy Williams, it meant spending two months in a shelter for the homeless with her newborn son, Bert, when they were evicted from their apartment building because the landlord had not paid the mortgage.

For Stephanie Epps, poverty means sharing her bed with her children because she does not have room to set up a crib. She and her two sons, ages 3 and 5 months, are crowded with her mother and sister in a three-room apartment. Stephanie, who is trying to finish her high school diploma, often gets up at 2 a.m. to study, since that is the only undisturbed time available to her.

For Ana Moreno, a refugee from El Salvador, it means being separated from her oldest son, who remains in El Salvador because she cannot afford to support him in this country. Ana works several days as a domestic but cannot work more without child care for her other children, which she cannot find or pay for.

She has already lost one job because her employer would no longer allow her to bring her youngest son with her to work.

These stories give us a real picture of the human beings and personal dilemmas behind our nation's poverty statistics. When we say that 46 percent of black children and 39 percent of Hispanic children are poor today, we know this means that millions of American families are struggling every day with some of the hardships faced by Aletha, Tweedy, Stephanie and Ana.

Their testimony about what it means to be poor shatters popular myths about "welfare queens" and "people who will not help themselves." These mothers are trying to make their lives better for themselves and their children, against very difficult odds.

If more of our lawmakers could hear the poor speak for themselves, they might be more reluctant to continue the destructive cutbacks in programs to assist the poor that we have seen in recent years.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund, a national voice for youth.

ABOUT LETTERS

The Chronicle welcomes letters from its readers, as well as columns. Letters should be as concise as possible and typed or printed legibly. They also should include the name, address and telephone number of the writer.

Columns should follow the same guidelines and will be published if we feel they are of interest to our general readership.

We reserve the right to edit letters for brevity and grammar.

Submit your letters and columns to Chronicle Mailbag, P.O. Box 3154, Winston-Salem, N.C., 27102.

'The Color Purple': The sad reality

The writer is an associate professor of English at Winston-Salem State University.

POINT

By DR. GLENDA E. GILL

Ain't been nothin' in a long time done lit up the black or white community like "The Color Purple." Or Tony Brown's wrath in a recent column on the film.

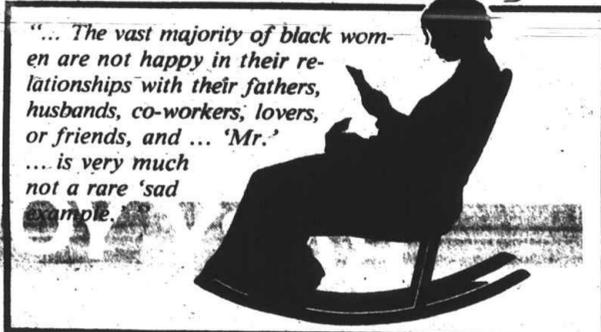
A person of reason cannot help but agree with Brown on some points. Black males have been stereotyped, and they have been for a long time in film and in books. So have black women by black and white writers. James Baldwin, for example, portrays a domineering Sister Margaret in the drama, "The Amen Corner."

Most of literature and most of film has portrayed black women and black men as brutes, tragic mulattoes, Sambos, sluts and mummies. This is not new information. As an angry Brown did and refuse to see the film, or we can see it and write new kinds of books and make new kinds of films, but that is not the major point of my response.

My main concern is that Brown states, "... although many black men have difficulty loving -- period -- because much of the love has been drained by the brutality of a society panicked over black masculinity, enough has been salvaged to make most black women happy."

I disagree with that strongly. It is my personal belief that the vast majority of black women are not happy in their relationships with

their fathers, husbands, co-workers, lovers, brothers or friends, and that the character "Mr." in "The Color Purple," while perhaps a bit exaggerated, is very much not a rare "sad example." I cannot deny that, indeed, White America may be consumed by black male sexuality, but most of America suffers from phallic obsession. And



many of us are drenched in materialism, consumption and status-seeking.

The "Shugs" are not the exceptions, either, but very much the rule -- women who are takers and cannibal mistresses who devour; fortunately, she is redeemed at the end of the film, just as "Mr." is.

In spite of the heritage of slavery and the very real circumstances of racism, we need a

solution to the very real, harsh world of bad relationships in which far too many of us live.

Lesbianism is not the solution, indeed. What, then, is?

In my personal opinion, neither black women nor black men are allowed to grow. We dash into marriages almost fresh out of the womb because society is so obsessed with the tyranny of the couple mentality. We rush into loveless marriages, to be, like Celie, used only as a sexual receptacle and a maid. We display

ourselves to men consumed with how we look, just as Celie paraded before "Mr." at her father's house just as if she were at a slave auction.

And, conversely, we measure our men the same way -- by their height, their sexual organs and their billfolds. Both sides expect superhumans.

We can continue to blame White America, or we can start. Please see page A5

Movie assaults black men and women

The writer is a Silver Springs, Md., doctor.

COUNTERPOINT

By WILLIE T. HAMLIN

SILVER SPRINGS, Md. -- The long-awaited release of this season's box-office success, "The Color Purple," is anything but the gift it was touted to be.

Under the guise of slick and glitzy production that we have come to associate with the movie's director, a fraud of the highest magnitude has been perpetrated on black men, black women, their children and society as a whole.

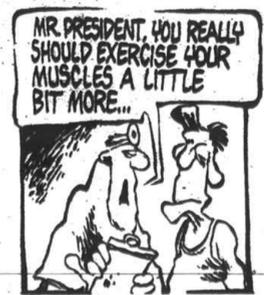
Had Reagan, Botha or Hitler collaborated to find a tool that would injure the already-fragile relationship between black men and women, they could not have done better than "The Color Purple."

The story behind the story provides the greatest lesson in the latest attempt to further polarize the sexes in the black community. Every single male character in this movie portrays the negative stereotypes of ignorance, brutality, immorality and alcohol abuse that this country has tied around the necks of black men for the past 300-plus years (245 of which were a vicious apartheid system).

The movie becomes so preoccupied with the perpetuation of these images that, to call it an imbalance in its portrayal of black men and black life would be a compliment.

The acts of cruelty attributed to the main character's stepfather and husband defy and insult the senses. The characterization of black men who carry on incestuous relations with their daughters, rip their just-born children out of their daughter's arms and sell them presents a powerful message to the movie's

audience, both black and white. In not one but two families, we are asked to believe that the wife and mistress of these inhuman specimens share the same household, and interchange childrearing responsibilities while catering to their men.



The image of black women offered up by this movie as long-suffering, cowtowing and abused individuals is no less believable

the picture here. The fact that the author of the book upon which this film was based is a black woman adds insult to the proverbial injury. If there is anything potentially positive that can be drawn from this travesty, it is that we see that Uncle Toms wear dresses, too.

The concept of selling out one's people for monetary gain is Please see page A13