

OPINION/ FORUM

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File Photo
 Jennifer Thompson and Darryl Hunt, another North Carolina man who benefitted from DNA testing, at a community forum in 2005.

DNA tests should be a right!



Marc Morial
 Guest Columnist

Imagine being convicted of a crime you didn't commit and languishing in prison for 11 years until new DNA evidence proved your innocence.

That's just what happened to Ronald Cotton whose story was told on CBS' 60 Minutes recently. Cotton's accuser, Jennifer Thompson, was absolutely certain she correctly identified the man who broke into her Burlington, North Carolina apartment and raped her on the night of July 28, 1984.

But she was wrong. And her mistake produced more than one other victim of that brutal crime - Ronald Cotton, an innocent man who was sentenced to life in prison, and several other women who were raped by the real criminal who remained free.

What finally turned the tide in Cotton's case was the science of DNA testing which Cotton's lawyer was allowed to use to prove his client's innocence. The real crime is that hundreds of wrongly convicted people are now behind bars, not only because of eye-witness flaws, but also because of the refusal by a small number of states to allow DNA evidence to be used to prove their innocence. According to the 60 Minutes report, there have been 233 people exonerated by DNA evidence across the country. More than 75 percent of them were convicted because of mistaken identity.

Ronald Cotton was one of the lucky ones. Timothy Cole of Lubbock, Texas was not so fortunate. He was sentenced to 25 years in 1985 after being wrongly identified by a rape victim. In 1999, Cole died in

prison before DNA testing and the jailhouse confession of another inmate later cleared his name. According to the Innocence Project, a national non-profit legal clinic dedicated to exonerating innocent people through DNA testing, there are thousands of prisoners desperate to have their cases evaluated.

Some of them are on death row. Most of them are "poor, forgotten and have used up all legal avenues for relief. The hope they have is that biological evidence from their cases still exists and can be subjected to DNA testing."

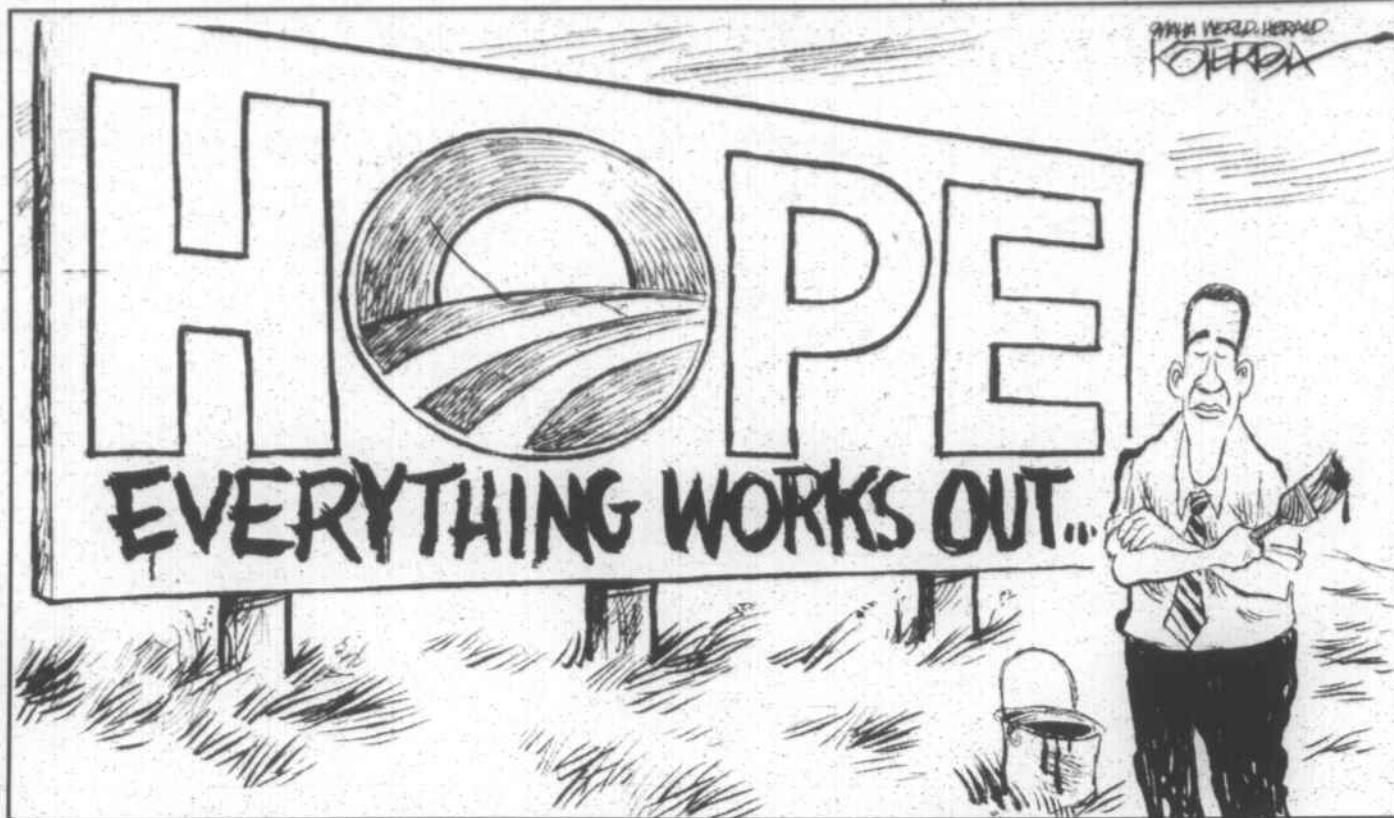
Dallas County District Attorney, Craig Watson, the first African American District Attorney in Texas, has made this issue a centerpiece of his work. He believes the DA's job is not only about prosecuting the guilty, it is also about protecting the innocent. That's why, in 2007 he established the Conviction Integrity Unit, the first division of its kind in the country dedicated to overturning wrongful convictions and securing the release of men and women who have been wrongfully imprisoned in Texas.

His efforts have helped secure the release of more than 19 wrongfully convicted prisoners thus far. Unfortunately, six states still deny prisoners access to DNA testing: Alaska, Alabama, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Mississippi and South Dakota.

The Supreme Court is now deliberating an Alaska case that could grant all prisoners that right. We believe that's what the Court should do.

In a nation that prides itself on the rule of law, there is no good reason to deny prisoners the right to DNA testing if it can prove their innocence, identify the guilty and prevent a tragic miscarriage of justice.

Marc H. Morial is president and CEO of the National Urban League.



Women hold up half the sky



Julianne Malveaux
 Guest Columnist

There is a Chinese proverb that expresses the sentiment that we women do more than our share in the social, political, economic and cultural development of our nation.

"Women hold up half the sky" is a statement that is reflected in statistics. Increasingly, women are the majority of those who seek undergraduate education, even as women still earn just three-quarters of what men earn.

Women hold up half the sky - in the African American community, women head nearly half of our households and raise most of our children. We do our share and then some, and we are too frequently unrecognized for our work.

We have done more than our share for much of our time on the planet, and it is egregious that our contributions are only recognized during Women's History Month, International Women's day

takes place on March 8, but the entire month of March, just one month of twelve, is set aside to lift up women's contributions.

In the African-American community we can call the roll that lifts up names like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Sadie Tanner Mosell Alexander, and many more.

When we call the roll we are reminded of women's strength, tenacity, and resilience. Then it rangles that the drum roll of African American history too often lifts up the men, gives short shrift to the women, and ignores the sky that sags when women do not do our share.

The Chinese proverb reminds us that we still live in a patriarchy where women's work is undervalued. We see it in the pay rates and the numbers, but we cannot see it more clearly than when we look at our public representation of reality.

Even when women comment on women, it is clear that patriarchy takes hold of some of our minds. No matter what happened between Chris Brown and Rihanna Fenty, it is disturbing to hear women opine that perhaps she had it coming.

It reflects conversations we have had before, conversations about the ways Mike Tyson might have been justified in his alleged rape of a young college student, about the ways that O. J. Simpson was to have been justified if he were involved in the murder of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson.

The fact is that, in a patriarchy, we make excuses for men and condemnations for women. The former Washington Post columnist Dorothy Gilliam nailed the phenomenon when she wrote that Black folks "raise our daughters and love our sons."

As we commemorate Women's History Month, it makes sense to raise and love them both, embracing both daughters and sons as they step out into the world. It makes sense to lift up the possibilities that men and women offer to our world and to celebrate us all.

It is especially important, in a compensatory way, to let young women know that they are, indeed, enough. They are complete whether or not they have men in their lives. This is an important message to deliver in a patriarchy, in the context with which we raise up men first and women second.

Women can never be second in a society where we do more than our share, where we hold up more than half the sky.

Women's History Month should celebrate the many ways that women operate in the center of our world. Our nation's recession reminds us of the many ways that women provide our nation with an extreme dependability factor.

We make ends meet when there are no ends, provide shoulders when there is nowhere to lean, are cheerleaders when there are few cheers, defenders when there are attacks.

In the African American community, we have been the followers, but not the leaders in our churches and schools, bridges across those turbulent times that our nation calls the troubled waters.

We are the backbone of our community, the silent heroes whose contributions are consistent, if not consistently recognized.

We women hold up half the sky. The Chinese proverb is an African American reality.

Julianne Malveaux is president of Bennett College for Women. She can be reached at presoffice@bennett.edu.

Morality and AIDS don't mix



Mario Scott
 Guest Columnist

There's an old adage that says, "Although we've come a long way, we have oh so far to go." Last week's news that an exorbitant number of Washington, D.C. residents have HIV or AIDS is utterly staggering and, in my mind, totally unacceptable.

As I sat in my office and pondered the complexity of the current situation, I couldn't help but wonder how we could, as a community of world citizens, allow this disease to get such a stronghold on our society. Undoubtedly, we have made tremendous advancements in HIV/AIDS awareness, education, testing and treatment. We have many programs and services that are specifically focused on combating different aspects of the disease; however, in light of the recent report, I couldn't help but wonder why it seems like the disease is still winning.

At that very moment, I caught a glance of the news flash that Pope Benedict XVI, who was in the middle of an African tour, had rejected the use of condoms - telling bishops in South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Namibia and Lesotho that contraception was one of a host of trends contributing to a "breakdown in sexual morality." While I respect the Pope and his position, his statement revealed to me that even with all the strides that we have made regarding HIV/AIDS, the ignorance of trying to make the virus a moral issue is tearing at the very fabric



AFP PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SIMON
 Dancers perform for Pope Benedict XVI last week during his swing through Africa.

of our society.

Saying that contraception is a reason for a breakdown of sexual morality is like saying seat belts cause accidents, but I digress. I am not trying to debate church doctrine, or any of the other stigmas associated with this disease such as promiscuity, both in hetero and homosexual terms, rampant intravenous drug use, etc. Most of us have the freedom to choose our faith, partner or lifestyle. In my opinion, while they make topics for great debates, those issues in large part are a distraction from the undeniable facts.

Facts such as these: In South Africa alone, 600 -1,000 people die everyday from AIDS. As a matter of fact - no

pun intended - the United Nations estimates more than 80 million Africans may die from AIDS by 2025 and HIV infections could reach 90 million, or 10 percent of the continent's population. These numbers alone should be alarming to all of us living in an age of globalization.

I know that some people reading this may be of the mindset that the United States of America has little to learn from Africa, but the recent Washington, D.C. report suggests that this country and that continent have more in common than many people knew. The study suggests that 3 percent of all District of Columbia residents are currently known to be living with HIV/AIDS. To

put that into context, the United Nations Joint Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have historically defined an HIV epidemic when the overall infection rate is more than 1 percent.

Not only are the D.C. rates three times higher, but new targeted studies suggest that 33 to 50 percent of the residents may be unaware of their HIV infections. So for those people who think that this is not Africa, I say you're absolutely correct because the rates of infection in D.C. are actually higher than in West Africa.

The point of this was not to overwhelm you with facts, but to highlight that as a global community, we need to make significantly more progress in fighting this public health epidemic. It is your right to take any position you want on the issues of morality, but while we are debating these issues, people are becoming infected with HIV/AIDS in epidemic and sometimes pandemic proportions.

If we could just put down our politics, preferences, and sometimes prejudices for a brief moment and focus not on our ideal situations, but on the reality of this horrible reality, we could start to get a handle on the complex problem of HIV/AIDS. Although we may have many miles to go in the battle against HIV/AIDS, focusing on our communities in a practical way can serve as a light to guide us to the end of the tunnel.

Mario L. Scott is a current Pfizer Global Health Fellow assigned to Winston-Salem's AIDS Care Service. He is also a hip hop artist and minister. Scott can be reached at Mario.Scott@ghf.pfizer.com.