

The Charlotte Post

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Life, sadly, imitates art

Sunday's shooting death of rapper Christopher Wallace, also known as the Notorious B.I.G., sent shock waves through the hip-hop nation as well as Black America. The 24-year-old was a rising star, with a million-selling debut album, but his life was cut short in a hail of bullets on a Los Angeles street. It's not the first time a rapper died a violent death. Tupac Shakur was gunned down almost six months to the day in Las Vegas, the first salvo in what some consider to be an escalating war between rival "gangsta" rappers. It's senseless and tragic to see young people actually start living — and dying — by the lyrics they rap.

Speculation abounds about the circumstances surrounding Wallace's death. The New York native was part of the East Coast gangsta rap movement, purveyors of music with a message that some consider degrading of women as well as excessively violent. He was considered a rival of Shakur, a West Coast gangsta rapper who accused Wallace of conspiring in a 1994 robbery that left him wounded and \$40,000 poorer. Wallace, on the other hand, was angered at Shakur's claim that he had sex with his wife, singer Faith Evans. The circumstance, if accurate, turned deadly despite calls for peace between the factions.

"I thought Tupac was going to be the end of it," producer Quincy Jones told USA Today. "But the psychodrama keeps going."

Rap didn't kill Wallace or Shakur. At its best, rap can be a positive outlet to life in urban America as well as a vehicle for protest and change. At its worst, "Thug Life," which was tattooed across Shakur's torso, becomes all too real. Berating women and glorifying reckless sex and violence are somehow seen as "keeping it real" in the rap world, but often that translates into young lives that are damaged by the messages — real or imagined — that some people glean.

Now would be a good time for adults and children to discuss what happened in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Neither of these men deserved to be cut down in the prime of their lives. What we as a community need to do is put our collective heads together to find solutions to the behavior that causes young people to treat each other in such a cold-blooded manner.

A plan for better schools

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Supt. Eric Smith unveiled his plan to improve the performance of students in the district this week. The 13 percent increase in funding he's expected to ask of Mecklenburg County commissioners is steep and deserves careful consideration.

Recent studies show Mecklenburg is starting to close gaps between the county and national scores on standardized tests. Still, much work needs to be done to help Mecklenburg students be the best academically-prepared youngsters in the state. Especially of concern for African

Americans is the improvement in black students' scores, which historically lag behind whites as a group. Should Smith's push for excellence include real and meaningful reforms for all students, Charlotte-Mecklenburg as a community should join with the school system to make sure it becomes reality.

Yankees, please go home

It's interesting that Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory testified before Congress Tuesday about how this city is run. McCrory was in the nation's capital to offer suggestions about how Washington, D.C., could learn from the Queen City about how to handle its business affairs, something that Washington hasn't been able to do of late. But we have to wonder: would D.C. Mayor Marion Barry let the Army come into Washington to conduct secret military exercises in a residential area?

Even if Mayor McCrory believed the Army's pledge to conduct its exercise in secrecy, he should've known that the roar of Blackhawk helicopters would rattle a few nerves and windows. Fearful neighbors flooded phone lines with concerns of a possible "invasion." At least the troops were American. Perhaps his honor will learn a valuable lesson — there's no such thing as a government secret, especially in someone's neighborhood.

Let's get together for 'Race Day'

By Joseph Martin
SPECIAL TO THE POST

For several years, I've been working on a book about two teenagers, one black and one white, who struggle with friendship as they grow up in the 1950s. As you can imagine with teenagers in the '50s, it's a pretty funny story. But there's a sadness at its core that will not go away, no matter how funny I try to be, as both boys come to understand that their friendship is never going to mature. It's as if there is some deadly destructive thing, some thing they don't know how to discuss, some thing they don't even know, some mysterious incurable thing in the environment that has infected their relationship and will ultimately stunt its growth — or kill it.

I wonder if that doesn't describe where we are, all of us, in our relationships with people of other races. My father was confident that the South would ultimately achieve racial reconciliation — that our character, our shared history would somehow triumph. Not yet, it hasn't.

Why? Maybe because that shared history of slavery, segregation and racism is something we don't deal with. Maybe it's like an incurable disease that we don't want to have, don't want to see a doctor about, don't want to talk about, don't want to think about. Nobody wants it, none of us; all of us want it to go away. But it's there. It keeps nagging at us, keeps popping up as some surprising irrational fear, some anger, some disabili-

ty or dysfunction that paralyzes our civic life, some thing that keeps separating us from each other so we don't have to confront it.

A lot of people have been out there fighting it ... in the streets, in the courts, in the legislatures. And there has been progress. But the racism that keeps us apart is not actually out there on the street. Not out there in some jury room. Not out there on some state house dome. Not the racism we need to confront, you and I. It's not out there at all. It's in here...

What if we recognize that our shared history of slavery, segregation and racism is a terrible diagnosis that we haven't yet come to grips with? A kind of civic trauma that we haven't yet dealt with? What if we stop denying it and start defying it? I don't think we even imagine, let alone know, what is possible. I do think that by actually sharing our shared history for a change, by facing this trauma together, we can turn race into a positive force that enriches our lives.

In his book "The Biology of Hope," Norman Cousins reminds us that fear, anger, hate, frustration, and despair are all damaging to our health. And that love, hope, faith, joy, laughter, festivity, sense of purpose, determination, and will to live can bring healing power.

Think "race." Which list comes to mind? What if we just put away fear, anger, hate,

frustration, despair — and overwhelm it with love/hope/faith/joy/laughter/festivity/sense of purpose/determination/will to live?

What can we actually do about racism? Bill Simms



Martin

has called for a Summit on Race for the whole community next fall. I'm in favor of that...

We need that Summit. We need to talk about race, and we need to have information that can be the basis of a consensus on where we are. Example: my young friends at Johnson C. Smith hear me say that we need to appreciate progress, that we've come a long way. They think I'm quaint. At best. They think census research shows that the economic gap between blacks and whites in Charlotte has actually increased since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that we may have come a long way but that some of us have used the undeserved privilege we were born into to come farther than others...

Here's what I'm going to do. Given the difference between what Bill Simms can do and what I can do, while he's building a racial summit, I'm going to work on racial molehills. I'm declaring every Thursday between now and Simms's Summit to be Race Day in Charlotte. I don't expect any hate mail; most people around

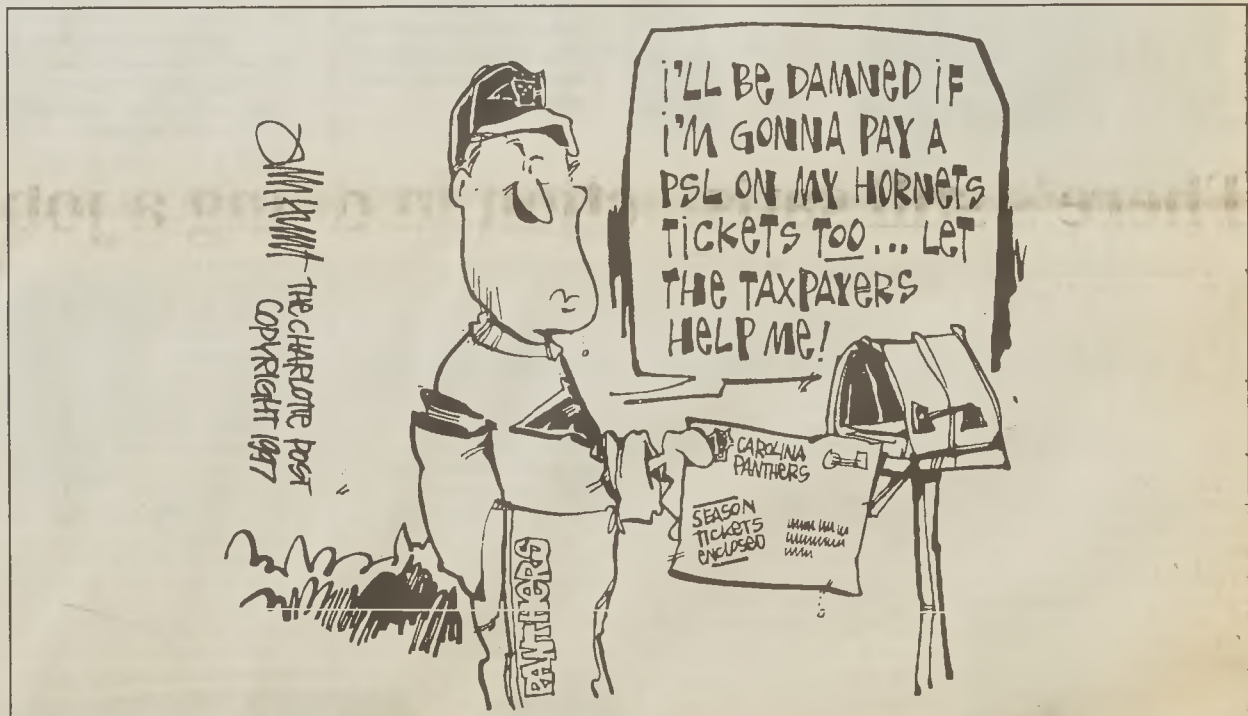
here will think I'm just honoring Jeff Gordon and Richard Petty. But that's the kind of race we do talk about and celebrate. I want to deal with the kind of race we don't talk about or celebrate.

The rules are simple. Every Thursday, I'm going to have lunch with somebody whose racial background and experience is different from mine. After six days a week with Scotch Presbyterians, Thursdays are going to feel like a festival. And we'll talk about, how to turn race into a positive force — not in the city, maybe, but in our own lives...

Now, if you were to do that, too... Think of it: If just 10 of us here — that's less than 1 percent — decided to have lunch next Thursday with someone of a different racial background, that'd be 20 people. Then if they all decided to do the same thing, the next Thursday, there'd be 40, then 80 the next. In six weeks, there'd be over 100 people. By the first Thursday in June there'd be 81,920.

Okay, I know what you're thinking: I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. But I really am looking forward to next Thursday. And somebody in here better invite me out. It'll be embarrassing to have people see me trying to do racial reconciliation, sitting at a table by myself.

JOSEPH MARTIN, an executive at Charlotte-based NationsBank, received the Whitney M. Young Award last week by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League. The preceding is excerpted from his acceptance speech.



Waste rampant in Food Stamp program

By Lauch Faircloth
SPECIAL TO THE POST

From using food stamps to buy a Mercedes and defrauding Medicare out of millions, to propping up dubious enterprises in the name of education, there seems to be no end to the misuse of taxpayer money in Washington, D.C. In the nation's capital, it is common for people to cry that their budget has been cut to the bone when it comes time for them to tighten the fiscal belt. But a closer look at the way billions of our tax dollars are spent shows that we can still rein in spending.

Each year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture spends over \$27 billion on the Food Stamp Program. Of this, more than ten percent, or nearly \$3 billion, won't help feed anyone. Instead, it will be lost to fraud, according to the USDA's Inspector General. Last year, state and local law enforcement officials in California conducted a sting operation to stem the flow of food stamps onto the black market. Agents found liquor stores that sold stolen goods alongside the spirits.

Here's how the scam worked: a stolen item priced at one hundred dollars could be bought for two hundred dollars in food

stamps. The storekeeper could then cash in the stamps at a legitimate bank, or pass the stamps onto the black market, and make a tidy profit off of our tax money.

Undercover agents also bought a Mercedes from a corrupt car dealer for \$20,000 in food stamps and \$13,500 in cash. Police spent over \$80,000 in food stamps for a variety of goods during the operation.

In some cases food stamp recipients are just middlemen between the government and the black market. "Runners" are people who wait outside food stamp issuance centers and offer cash for food stamps as recipients walk out of the building. In Philadelphia last year, two grocery store owners were arrested for redeeming over \$1.8 million in food stamps that they had purchased from runners and redeemed through their stores. The arrests in these cases demonstrate that there is a ready market for food stamps — paid for with your tax dollars. Fortunately, in some states,

electronic cards are being used in place of paper food stamps to combat fraud. But the way the system works now, paper food stamps can be sold for cash, and not used for feeding the needy.

The Medicare program and its long-term viability was a key issue in last year's election. But also at issue should be the money lost to dishonest people out to cheat elderly Americans who rely on Medicare for their health care needs. The General Accounting Office estimates that in 1996 fraud and abuse cost the Medicare program between \$6 billion and \$20 billion. In New York, a psychologist was arrested for defrauding the Medicare program of over \$1.4 million over a five year period. The doctor used four aliases and five different social security numbers to claim payment for services to Medicare patients. Most of the counseling sessions never occurred, but the doctor did kickback 25 percent of what she received to "patients" who let her use their names on claim forms.

But the waste did not end there. Taxpayers had to foot a \$5.6 billion bill for deadbeats on student loans from 1993-1995. Part of the reason that our bill is so high, is the somewhat dubious enterprises that qualify for the federal student loan pro-

gram. A chain of beauty schools in Chicago had a student loan default rate of over 82 percent. The school (I use the term loosely) received over \$4 million of tax money for student loans over a two-year period. The Department of Education recently declared them ineligible to receive further tax money.

Officials at another beauty school in Maryland cheated the loan program of over three million dollars. School officials falsified student attendance records, punched student time cards, and manufactured student exams and grades in order to keep tax money they were not entitled to. The owners of the school made the scheme a full-time job. By the time they were caught, they had falsified over 500 records.

There are hundreds of examples of people being caught with their hand in the taxpayers' wallet. But the examples I have mentioned show that, with the size and scope of the federal government we have today, there is a need to stay vigilant when it comes to reducing government spending and making sure that bureaucrats really have cut their budgets "to the bone."

LAUCH FAIRCLOTH, a farmer and businessman, is the junior U.S. Senator from North Carolina.



Smith



Faircloth