

LIFESTYLES

"Gen X-er" challenges Charlotte

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

A national political commentator and author issued a challenge to more than 400 African Americans Saturday.



Smiley

Tavis Smiley, author of "Hard Left: Straight Talk About the Wrongs of the Right" and host of Black Entertainment Television's "BET Talk" challenged black Charlotte to "look 20 or 30 years down the road."

"What is our community going to look like with this so-called Generation X who did not live through civil rights," Smiley asked. "That means they have no first-hand perspective of what it means to do without...Most of us don't have no first hand respect of what it means to be denied..."

Smiley also implored young people to be patient and wait their turn to be leaders.

"We spend too much time in our community worrying about how they're going to get the old Negroes out of the way," he said.

During his 45-minute speech that brought the audience to its feet several times, Smiley spoke to the young and baby boomers, imploring each to be cognizant of the other's perspective and history.

Smiley was in town for Focus on Leadership's annual Unsung Hero Awards Gala and Diamond Celebration at Marriott Executive Park.

Ten Charlotteans were honored for making significant strides in their fields as well as individuals who dared to dream. Smiley gave his thoughts on everything from the recent passage of Mecklenburg County commissioners resolution to end funding for gay art to the status of affirmative action in California.

"Give me a topic," he said. "Chances are it somehow affects the black community."

Smiley got the most applause during his five-minute diatribe on Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Thomas said in a recent article he "was divinely inspired to vote against affirmative action."

"Clarence Thomas has the nerve to say that God told him to vote against affirmative action," Smiley said. "I know you have a hard time believing that God talks to Clarence Thomas, much less that he told him to vote against affirmative action."

Smiley also expressed his respect for Focus on Leadership, a 10-year-old organization that provides leadership training for African Americans.

"It is seldom - almost never - that I get to speak to group like this," he said. "I think it is absolutely vital, necessary and essential. I don't think we can do without a group like Focus on Leadership."

FOL has graduated more than 150 people during its first 10 years.

This year's Unsung Heroes

- Media - Steve Crump
- Personal Achievement - Debra Hayes
- Politics - Don Baker
- Religion - the Rev. Claude Williams
- Youth - J. R. Williams
- Arts - B.E. Noel
- Business Entrepreneur - Charles Kelly
- Community Service - Mattie Marshall
- Education - the Rev. Brenda H. Tapia
- Human Service - Dee Dolby

Young. Black. Gay.



PHOTO: PAUL WILLIAMS III

Each week, Time Out Youth meet to talk about about sexuality. From left, Eric Cureton, Chris Lanston, Chris Bracken, Curtis McCleod and group leader, Tonda Taylor.

Youth talk about race, sex and discrimination

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Five young people from Tonda Taylor's youth group are crowded around a small table at the Metropolitan Community Church.

They talk about the things most young people talk about.

The prom. A camping trip planned for the summer. A trip to D.C. for a youth conference.

They talk about other more sinister things as well.

Prejudice, fear and stereotypes. They often talk about loneliness, depression and being left out.

In the same breath, they also talk about the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners' decision to require teens to have parents present during counseling about sexual issues.

For them, it's often a matter of life and death.

They say if they're required to have parents present, they simply won't go, which puts them at risk.

All of Taylor's youth are gay or questioning their sexuality. Many are African American.

The group, Time Out Youth, which does not receive any county funding, will not be affected by the commissioners' decision.

Many TOY members say they would not go for counseling if their parents had to be there. It would make them uncomfortable.

"They (the commissioners) don't know what it's like," Taylor says, pointing to a poster that lists questions gay youth often ask themselves. "They (the youth) don't know how to feel and someone does something like this."

According to Dr. Frank Mondimore, a Charlotte psychiatrist and author of "A Natural History of Homosexuality," there are at least 3,200 black gays in Mecklenburg County based on the estimates that at least 2 percent and as many as 4 percent of the population is homosexual.

"There aren't a lot of cross-cultural studies about gays," he says. "But studies show that across the board in any population, at least 2-4 percent of the population will be homosexual."

Taylor's youth know all the problems first hand. One bubble on the poster asks "Is the way I'm feeling wrong?"

"The commission says it is. It makes me angry, sad, frustrated and determined to keep looking for opportunities to challenge that attitude and that prejudice," Taylor said

after the meeting. "More and more research is indicating that either homosexuality and any sexual orientation is genetically inherited or a combination of other factors that are very deeply ingrained before you hit the first grade. It is not a choice."

Time Out Youth know that first hand.

A double negative

"There's such a discomfort level with the question of homosexuality in the African American community," says Curtis McCleod. "It goes around. People know who they are, but they just don't want to talk about it...you're really picked on and discriminated against."

McCleod, 27, is the elder statesman of the group. Always quick with a joke, McCleod has been out, or an acknowledged gay, for almost 10 years. He's a trained facilitator who helps run group meetings.

The value of the group is immeasurable, he says.

"(Coming out) was an extremely tough decision," he said. "It was something I had to search into myself to do. I knew who I was, but for me to say the fact that I was gay was a big milestone for me."

McCleod said he had friends to turn to, but few of them were African American.

"It's kept so secret that there's a huge gay population

here in Charlotte," he says.

McCleod says often black gays are hesitant to join white gay activities. It makes them seem "too out," he says.

"People are ignorant about the fact of homosexuality," he says. "If they see the role models out in the gay community, see that we work, have jobs and homes, that's when the perception will change."

"It seems so much that the gender roles are so...it's only black and white," he says. "There are no shades of gray. If you're not one way, you're not acceptable."

Michael

Michael enters the room quietly, his head down.

He says he's 17, but his size and face belie that claim. Michael is actually 14 or 15, still struggling with his identity. But he's squeezed a lifetime of knowledge into his short years.

Michael says he's always known that he was "different." He doesn't want to be photographed. And he doesn't want his real name used.

"I'm still in school," he says. "I have people who might find out. I'm not worried about them finding out. It's the harassment. I just don't want them to know."

Michael's parents don't know that he questions his sexuality. And if they had to be told for

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Black student groups, rooted in revolt, search for new purpose

By Michael Raphael
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. - For a group that staged sit-ins at Penn State University during the '60s, '70s and '80s, the March meeting of the Black Caucus was striking.

Only one of the student organization's 350 members showed up for the start of election season. Two weeks later, when the registration deadline passed without a single candidate for president, the leadership laid down an ultimatum: Either black students step forward to lead the group or it would be dissolved.

"We made the stakes high," said president Nikitra Bailey. "It's the only way to get people to listen."

With the end of blatant discrimination at most schools, the same apathy seen at Penn State has settled on many black umbrella organizations at campuses across the country.

"A lot of students now believe that the whole struggle is over, the notion that we shall overcome. They believe they have arrived," said Walter Kimbrough, the director of student activities and leadership at Old Dominion University and a nationally known expert on black student organizations. "Black students are getting involved in mainstream culture and they don't see the need for those groups," he said.

The Black Caucus and other groups like it grew out of a need for representation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With the success of the Civil Rights movement came a growing influx of black students to predominantly white institutions.

"It was relatively easy to form the group," said Larry Young, the director of the Robeson Cultural Center at Penn State and a longtime adviser to the caucus. "There was a tangible need. Students could look around and see the problems that they faced collectively and that was stimulus."

Students demanded classes on black culture and history, taught by black professors, with students on black scholarships attending. In reply, universities created African studies programs and built cultural centers for black students, said Deborah Atwater, the head of the department of African, African American studies at Penn State.

Through the 70s and 80s, the number of black students on American campuses increased and so did their power. Slowly they began to make their mark in mainstream student government associations. At the same time, the number of specialized black organizations grew, reaching 30 today at Penn State for 2,700 black undergraduates.

"They may be a victim of their own success," said James Stewart, vice provost for educational equity at Penn State. "When you do a good job and are able to make improvements, some people may think you don't have to work to keep those gains in place. They become complacent. There's no perceived crisis, no burning issue. So people are operating on a plane."

At Iowa University, the Black Student Union is now one of the smallest of 21 black organizations on campus. Phillip Jones, the dean of students, said the group, which once served as a central clearinghouse for black activity, has tried to evolve into a more proactive role with mixed success.

"They have found it difficult to be a catalyst force," he said.

Minorities head toward small town life

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORT HURON, Mich. - The first black residents of St. Clair County arrived in the 19th century, often via the Underground Railroad that delivered slaves out of the South.

Now, a mini-exodus of black families are making a voyage from Detroit, the Detroit Free Press reported in Monday's editions.

It's hardly enough movement to be considered a trend - Port Huron is just under 7 percent black, St. Clair County just over 2 percent.

The black families say race relations are slightly better an hour or so from Detroit, and that whatever problems they encounter are overshadowed by the freedom from crime and the rural atmosphere.

For Elaine Flowers, who

moved to Port Huron in 1994 with her mother and son, the predominantly white neighborhood was welcoming. They brought cookies and a loaf of raisin bread. The local supermarket sent a certificate for a dozen eggs and a half-gallon of milk.

"I think there's a sense of harmony. I don't think there's any overt racism," Flowers said of Port Huron, a city of 33,000 people at the northeast corner of the seven-county region.

A social worker who grew up in Port Huron and returned after 16 years in Detroit, Flowers, 46, said it offers a more wholesome environment for her 12-year-old son, Reggie.

In a Free Press analysis of U.S. census data updated in 1994, the black movement into St. Clair County was one of several signs of people chipping

away at southeast Michigan's historic racial barricades.

From 1980 to 1994, the percentage of blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans grew in Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston, Washtenaw, Monroe and St. Clair counties. Only Wayne County had an overall population decline during that time.

But what's happening in metro Detroit is not about race, but about quality of life, said Bill Beckham, president of New Detroit Inc., the race relations coalition.

"It's driven by education and economics," Beckham said. "People are looking for better schools, better neighborhoods and what they can afford."

The trend is not surprising, said University of Pennsylvania demographer Douglas Massey. Many smaller cities such as

Port Huron are attracting blacks who see them as safer and affordable, but not in numbers large enough to make whites uneasy, he said.

"In a place like Port Huron," Massey said, "you can have an open housing market and if you're a white person with limited racial tolerance, you won't have to share your neighborhood with very many black people."

In some areas, minorities show dramatic percentage gains, but their actual numbers are still small. For example, a 100-percent jump in the black population of a rural township may mean only that a second family has arrived.

The Asian population of Macomb County increased by more than 22 percent from 1990 to 1994.