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Cops under fire

Black officers under attack across the U.S.

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson

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What started out as a verbal confrontation between two motorists at a traffic light on a Los Angeles street in March, ended in the shooting death of one of the motorists, Kevin Gaines. Since violent street encounters are not uncommon in Los Angeles, the shooting might have gotten only passing mention in the news. But there was a twist.

Gaines was a 10-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department, and an African American. Frank Lyga, the motorist who shot Gaines, was also a 10-year veteran of the LAPD, and white. At the time of the shooting, Lyga was in plainclothes, and on an undercover assignment. Gaines was off duty. Lyga claimed that he shot Gaines in self-defense when the latter pulled a gun. Apparently neither knew that the other was a police officer.

An LAPD spokesperson called the shooting "bizarre" and downplayed any possibility that it was racially motivated. But many black officers weren't so sure. Gaines' co-workers praised him as a "good officer" and a dedicated professional. Leonard Ross, a 22-year LAPD veteran, and president of the Oscar Joel Bryant Foundation, an association that represents the black LAPD officers, was skeptical of the official version, "At face value it doesn't add up. I think a lot of questions still need to be answered." An investigation is pending.

The Gaines shooting came at a time when the LAPD still reels from the Rodney King beating, the racist revelations of Mark Fuhrman, the Christopher Commission's documented report of racism and abuse within the LAPD, and the ouster of the LAPD's first African American chief, Willie Williams (strongly opposed by the mostly white police union). The disclosure that there were two complaints against Lyga for excessive force in 1991 increased the suspicions of some black officers that Gaines out of uniform may have been seen as just another black "gangsta."

A month after the Gaines shooting, Aaron Campbell was maced and body slammed to the ground by white officers during a traffic stop near Orlando, Fla. A district commander of the Metro-Dade Police department, Campbell was stopped for having a tag that "obscured" his vehicle tag. The tag in question was a sticker that identified him as a member of the Fraternal Order of Police. Campbell was charged with resisting arrest and battery. An investigation is pending. Whether the Gaines shooting or the Campbell arrest was the result of racial harassment or police vigilance, the incidents point to the troubling reality that black officers all too often are victims of unfriendly fire or physical assaults from white officers.

Since 1941, 12 black officers have been wounded and five killed by white officers in New York. In Nashville, and Oakland, black officers working undercover have been beaten by white officers. In most other cases, no legal or disciplinary action is taken against white officers who beat, shoot, or harass black officers.

The fear of death from unfriendly fire is so great that some black officers in New York and other cities have refused to accept undercover assignments, particularly in high crime areas. Ross notes that fear of violence also grips many black officers out of uniform when they have encounters with white officers, "Many black officers feel that they are not accorded the same level of professionalism as their counterparts," he said. The tendency of many police officials to protect white officers accused of brutality is the "foundation" of the "Them versus Us" police culture, says Ron Hampton executive director of the National Black Police Officers Association.

More sensitivity and cultural diversity training, the hiring and promotion of more black police officers, and more diverse assignments for black officers have helped reduce the violence against black officers. But police officials delude themselves if they think this is enough. Many white officers harbor deep racial biases that are compounded by the stress of police work.

Hampton contends that many police officials instinctively cover-up and make excuses for officer abuse, "What we label the 'police culture' or 'police mentality' reflects the racism in society. Officers must be taught in the academy and [have] reinforced repeatedly while on-duty that law enforcement is race neutral and a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later policy will not be condoned when dealing with minorities." The Association supported the recent National Emergency Conference on Police Brutality and distributes a "Ten Step Strategy to stop police misconduct and brutality" to community organizations and police agencies.

Hampton also blames many black officers for being complicit in perpetuating or ignoring abuse even when they're the targets, "black officers don't speak out and even commit brutal acts out of fear of not being seen as a team player or that protesting abuse will damage their career." But many black officers that have been shot, beaten or harassed by white officers consider themselves team players and are praised as "good cops," yet are still treated as criminals. And that won't change until police officials make it clear that black officers are not "gangstas" but officers too.

EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON is a columnist and author.

When counterculture is acceptable

Sherman
Miller



As I watched Ellen DeGeneres attempt to legitimize lesbianism as a mainstream American lifestyle, I wondered about the long term damage this Hollywood feat was bringing. Seeing Oprah Winfrey exploit her credibility by offering tacit approval to Ellen's actions - as an actor in the controversial show that aired Ellen's homosexual admission - made me feel that mainstream America learned nothing from the plight of black America following Hollywood creating pseudo black values that ran counterpoised to reason.

First off, let me say I will not patronize anyone by saying I have gay friends. On the other hand, I have no problem with what consenting adults want to do in the privacy of their own homes. I do not condone discrimination against gay persons and I hate gay bashing. However, I do have problems when folks glorify a lifestyle that is solely their own

choice without fully appreciating the long term impact of their actions on the United States of America.

It is common knowledge that two movies ("The Birth of a Nation" and "Superfly") had very deleterious impacts on the upward mobility of the black community. What little I have seen of "The Birth of a Nation," there is no doubt in my mind that it is a propaganda film for Ku Klux Klan sympathizers because it highlights all of the fears that white folks have of blacks. This venomous movie generated an atmosphere where white Americans felt good about hating blacks because it depicted African Americans as a sinister people out to do harm to or exploit white Americans at every opportunity.

It took the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts and the U.S. Supreme Court knocking down the miscegenation laws to start undoing the horrific impact of "The Birth of a Nation." But these acts also echoed in another deadly era in Hollywood known as the black exploitation movie epoch. These Hollywood movies were hellbent on exploiting the worst undertones in the black community and they legitimated

the current black male scoundrel caricature etched into mainstream America's psyche.

Of the black exploitation movies, "Superfly" had the most impact on black America and it was a catalyst for the present moral decay that is eroding the underpinnings of the nation. This movie legitimated the black American gangster ("Pusher Man," etc) as the new symbol in the black community since anyone could become a drug kingpin. It also ballyhoed the use of drugs as an escape from problems and a source of pure pleasure.

Young soul brothers dreamed of emulating the "Pusher Man" with his fine cars, many women, and you name it. The Pusher Man's actions grew unabated because the gangsters knew that black Americans hated the police and some areas of the black community had corrupted police coverage. America's media saw the drug scourge as an inner-city poor neighborhood problem, thereby refusing to accept that they poisoned whoever uses them. Today, we hear estimates that America consumes 70 percent of the world's drugs which tells you that inner-city neighborhoods could not use all of it without a major portion of the

population walking around high all of the time.

The drug scourge is now touching people of all walks of life in America. Death and mayhem, once only the province of the inner-city are plaguing small towns all over the nation. This plague has spawned a new breed of multinational pirates we shall label the "Multinational bondsman" who garner their riches through guaranteeing pleasurable highs on the one hand and exploiting slavery through addiction on the other.

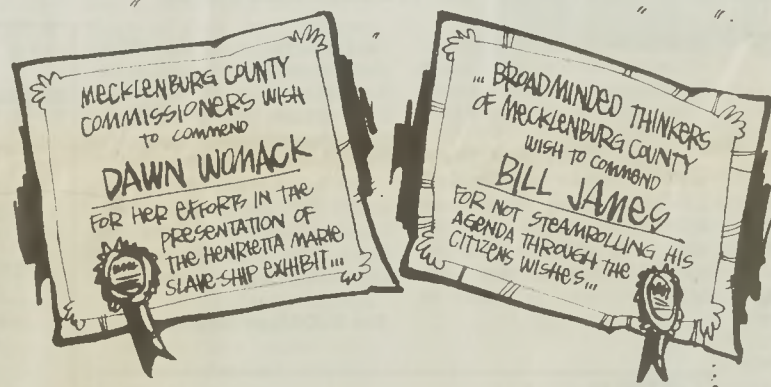
What I am suggesting is that Hollywood should not elevate countercultures to mainstream legitimacy without taking responsibility for their actions. I chatted with a professional mother, with two young daughters, to get her opinion on "Ellen" coming out of the closet. She worried about overhearing young girls asking their friends, "Are you gay?"

I believe discretion is the operative word for folks who want to follow alternative lifestyles and that media has a responsibility to use some common sense in what we glorify.

SHERMAN MILLER is a columnist in Wilmington, Del.

My late maternal grandmother,

COMMENDATIONS THAT WILL NEVER BE...



Children and prioritizing

Americans can join Stand For Children drive to give kids a chance at success

Marian
Wright
Edelman



Vivian Young of Wilmington, Del., has made it her mission to see that politicians, preachers, and parents don't forget the children.

On one occasion, she approached a pastor she had heard was one of the most dedicated preachers around. "That being the case," she told the minister, "I need a miracle or two: I need your church outreach program to take in some children who aren't in your immediate church family. I don't always get a good response from ministers, but I have to let them know that there's a lot more to pastoring than preaching and passing the plate," she says.

On another occasion, she walked into a gathering of state policy makers and said, "You may know that I conduct Child Watch visits [where she gives politicians and community leaders a firsthand look at children's plight by taking them on tours of neonatal wards, orphanages, juvenile courts, and other children's services], but just remember, I'll be watching you."

Ever since Vivian helped organize more than 2,700 people to Stand For Children at the Lincoln Memorial last June 1, she has been working hard to keep children a top priority in Delaware. She's been bouncing

from hearings at the State House in Dover to community meetings in Wilmington - arming herself with all the information she can gather about the needs of Delaware's children and focusing attention on specific things people can do to improve young people's lives.

At last count she had more than 30 organizations working together to plan the local Stand For Healthy Children rally on June 1, 1997 in Wilmington. They include social service agencies, churches, and community groups, which will highlight the health needs of America's children. Many child health experts have been invited to speak at the gathering, more than 60 health booths will be set up, and there will be fun activities and food for the children who attend. "We will even have healthy food," Vivian says with a smile. "The children will be eating veggie burgers, but maybe we'd better keep that secret since it's good for them."

The Delaware rally will coincide with hundreds of rallies in communities all across America. So far there are more than 300 local Stand For Children rallies planned in 50 states. Under the umbrella of Stand For Children, people are networking and coming together with ideas

for how to solve many of the problems children are facing, Vivian says. "There are a lot of services out there, but people don't know how to access them," she says. "When somebody needs to know something about mental health services for young people, I know I can turn to someone in our network to find out about it. It feels good when I can tell people how they can get help and not have to pay a lot of money for it."

As in every state, Vivian says, Delaware's children are suffering from poverty, poor nutrition, preventable childhood illnesses, and lack of health and dental coverage. "If everyone would get involved, children would not be suffering here or anywhere else," she says.

With Vivian's help, Delaware Stand For Children has organized committees to address children's issues. "We have set up committees on education, health, housing, abuse and crime, and each committee is researching its area so that we can be informed when we appear before members of the Legislature," Vivian says. "There are so many problems that it's astonishing."

Vivian has also gotten her family involved. Her husband, Leonard Sr., who spent many years with the United Nations

International Labor Organization before retiring, handles clerical duties for Delaware Stand For Children. And her only son, Leonard Jr., who retired from Dupont after 25 years, helps out with business affairs.

"My life is frenetic, but it's interesting," says Vivian, who often stays up until 2 or o'clock in the morning preparing for her visits to policy makers. "Sometimes I think about sitting on the porch and knitting, and then I say, 'Nah! I'm supposed to be living at this pace.' I think it's what keeps me young."

When state Rep. Jane Mulrooney handed Vivian the Delaware Tomorrow Award recently, for her work with children, Mulrooney said, "It seems as if everybody will recognize the Delaware Stand For Children as a dominant force for children for a long time." "She was right," Vivian says. "We will be a force that the Legislature, the governor, and the local government will have to deal with. And the good thing about Stand For Children is that it's not a onetime thing. We will remain a force for children."

For information on how you can Stand For Healthy Children in your community on June 1, 1997, call (800) 663-4032.

Bennettsville, S.C., native MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is president of the Children's Defense Fund, which coordinates the Black Community Crusade for Children. For more information about the BCCC, call (202) 628-8787.