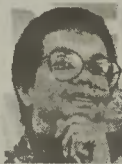


Legal tangles snare black victims

MARIAN
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Each day in America 1,139 black children and youths are arrested.

A recent study of incarceration rates showed that if current trends continue, one in 18 Black women and one in three Black men will be incarcerated during their lifetime. These statistics are devastating, not only for the tragedy in individual lives but for our nation and its justice system which fails to be just. For many Black youths, the spirit of the law is applied in a very dubious and harmful manner.

We all hear these stories far too often. A case being fought in Georgia right now is receiving national attention. I hope it continues

until justice is done.

Marcus Dixon is a talented black 19-year-old who should be in the middle of his freshman year at Vanderbilt University. Instead, he is locked up in a Georgia prison. A scholar with a 3.9 grade point average and a star football player, Marcus won a full scholarship to Vanderbilt during his senior year of high school in Rome, Ga., last spring. Shortly after being accepted to Vanderbilt, he was accused of having forcible sex with a white girl three months shy of her 16th birthday. Marcus and others maintained that the sexual tryst in a classroom on school grounds was planned ahead of time. Several of the girl's classmates also testified that she later had told them it was consensual. Afterwards, the white teen told Marcus that her father could never find out that she had been with a black person or he "would

kill us both." Soon after, she filed the charges accusing him of rape.

It took the jury only 20 minutes to acquit Marcus of charges of rape, aggravated assault, false imprisonment, and sexual battery at his trial. But because 18-year-old Marcus was legally an adult at the time, they voted to convict him of misdemeanor statutory rape and aggravated child molestation. The latter, however, carries a mandatory 10-year sentence with no hope of parole.

The jurors hadn't been told about the sentencing guidelines during their deliberations, and several later said they believed they were agreeing to a very light charge that would allow Marcus to return home that afternoon. They were shocked when they heard the judge read the sentence.

Marcus is currently appealing his wrongful con-

viction on two primary grounds: (1) the sentence represents cruel and unusual punishment under the Constitution; and (2) the sentence is inconsistent with the intent of the child molestation law.

The author of that child molestation law, black Georgia State Representative Tyrone Brooks (D-Atlanta), agrees this was a blatant and overzealous misapplication of the law intended to protect children from adult child molesters-not to punish teens engaged in consensual sex. A significant majority of states have passed so-called "Romeo and Juliet" laws that de-criminalize consensual sex between teens in just this kind of situation. Many of the jurors say they share his views but believed they had no choice but to convict. They don't believe Marcus deserved the punishment he received. I don't

either.

The Children's Defense Fund has filed an amicus brief in support of Marcus Dixon's appeal to overturn his conviction with the Georgia Supreme Court. We have been joined by a range of child welfare and juvenile justice organizations and religious denominations. The appeal is being argued on January 21.

This case is about saving Marcus Dixon's life and future. But it is also about taking a stand to stop the unjust incarceration of young black males. If we don't stop this dangerous trend of black males being fodder for a growing prison industry, the black family and black political and economic strength will be destroyed. It's time to fight for our children.

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Send pols' sons to the front lines

By Stanley Kober.
SPECIAL TO THE POST

In recent speeches, President George Bush has proclaimed his desire to spread the blessings of freedom throughout the world, emphasizing that Americans pursued this objective throughout the 20th century. As he told the National Endowment for Democracy in November: "In the trenches of World War I, through a two-front war in the 1940s, the difficult battles of Korea and Vietnam, and in missions of rescue and liberation on nearly every continent, Americans have amply displayed our willingness to sacrifice for liberty."

Yes, we have, but we have not always been successful and our leaders have not always displayed their willingness to sacrifice themselves for liberty.

It is noteworthy that the president included Vietnam in his list. A generation of American leaders, haunted by the Anglo-French betrayal of Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938, decided the United States had to honor its security guarantee to South Vietnam to prevent a repeat of history. They thought they were defending freedom. But the Vietnam War traumatized the American people, who ultimately decided they could not bear the sacrifice the war demanded.

A generation has passed, and approximately the same amount of time separates Iraq from Vietnam as separated Vietnam from Munich. Those two precedents define the paradox of intervention. Munich will forever exemplify the consequences of appeasement, but Vietnam serves as a reminder of the dangers of over-commitment.

Curiously, however, now that it has ascended to power, the generation that lived through Vietnam no longer seems to be influenced by it. President Bill Clinton was initially cautious about using military force. But by the end of his presidency he had initiated war in the Balkans. President Bush has been even more emphatic about the need to use military force. "In the new world we have entered," he argued in the September 2002 National Security Strategy, "the only path to peace and security is the path of action."

Yet for all his talk about sacrifice, Bush never served in Vietnam. He spent the war flying National Guard aircraft over Texas.

"I am angry that so many of the sons of the powerful and well placed ...managed to wangle slots in Reserve and National Guard units," Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote in his memoirs. "Of the many tragedies of Vietnam, this raw class discrimination strikes me as the most damaging to the ideal that all Americans are created equal and owe equal allegiance to their country."

Powell's point is well taken. The draft was supposed to impose equality in military service, but it didn't. The volunteer service has worked well, but it is also much smaller than the armed forces of the Cold War years. Even so, by the late 1990s, recruitment was running into difficulty.

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Missing academic value of community center

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It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that public school problems today are local problems; therefore, there may be no one recipe that solves all of the problems. Each locality must solve its own problems, but there are facets of the solutions that transcend localities.

Kathleen Cotton and Karen Reed Wikelund offer the impact of parental involvement in their article entitled, "Parent Involvement in Education," written for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. They write, "... It is important for school people and parents to be aware that parent involvement supports students' learning, behavior, and attitudes regardless of factors such as parents' income, educational level, and whether or not parents are employed. That is, the involvement of parents who are well-educated, well-to-do, or have larger amounts of time to be involved has not been shown to be more beneficial than the involvement of less-advantaged parents.

All parent involvement

works and works well. ..."

Although Cotton and Wikelund's report offers hope when parent involvement is a reality in a child's life, it does run counterpoised to what one might imagine. This counter-intuitive feeling is corroborated in a December 23, 2003, article entitled, "D.C.s' public schools foundering," published on CNN.com. This article states, "...Many students can't get the help they need at home because of this stark statistic: 37 percent of the city's adults read below a ninth-grade level. ..."

If we take a holistic look at the assets in our local neighborhoods, we may find that there are vehicles present that can help us circumvent this parent involvement nightmare. Many neighborhoods have very good community centers that many people may merely view as places of recreation. Yet the community center offers the potential of reshaping the mindset on education in the inner-city community because it is a neutral ground between the public school system and the neighborhood.

If community centers would become regular meeting places between parents and school officials (teachers and administrators), this would offer an opportunity for many inner-city parents needing background

enhancement to interact with the school system. Parents with very poor educational backgrounds should feel comfortable talking to educators especially if educated community personnel or volunteers are on hand to interpret complex issues for neighborhood people. Hence, I will offer a suggestion for improved parental involvement centered on my hometown of the city of Wilmington, Del..

Since Wilmington is served by four metropolitan school districts resulting from a court-ordered desegregation plan, its inner-city community centers might become hosting locations for inner-city parent and teacher meetings. Wilmington community centers have faced budget cuts in the present down economy, so they may need a pledge of financial support for a minimum of five years to maintain their ability to be able to handle long-term parent-teacher meeting efforts. Community centers may use their own transportation vehicles or they may offer parents bus tokens or even cab fare depending on the special circumstance.

Philanthropic individuals and foundations could be broached on underwriting pilot programs. The schools should be encouraged to offer some financial support. The mayor's office could

encourage the Delaware General Assembly to underwrite the bulk of the funds to help the educational improvement of the Wilmington labor force to attract new businesses to move to Delaware.

Since community centers may service different racial and ethnic groups, each community center should devise its own parent-teacher effort with the ideas in mind from "12 Things Parents Should Know" by Parent Leadership Associates. Some of the twelve items parents should know are: "Your involvement matters - a lot;" "You can be involved in many ways;" "Children need you;" "Schools need you;" "You should be told clearly how your child's school is doing."

In the first two years, the pilot program might be limited to two Wilmington community centers. Each center may be allocated perhaps \$15,000 per year to underwrite transportation, small gifts, food, meeting rooms, and clean-up cost for the first two years to assess the cost of the effort. Poor parents or guardians of all students living in the neighborhoods serviced by the community center would have access to financial help to participate in the parent-teacher efforts. Two major efforts that attract a number of parents may be undertaken during

the academic year. Community centers can turn out parents in their neighborhoods for the major functions. The community centers also would provide meeting locations for individual parent-teacher conferences throughout the academic year, and childcare during their educational activities.

In year three, Wilmington might expand the pilot program to include two additional community centers replete with elementary, middle, and high school programs covering their constituencies. Also, they should seek long-term funding through state and local government appropriations.

In 1999, Debra Moffitt, writing in the Wilmington News Journal, offered a disquieting assessment of the academic performance of students living in the city of Wilmington. She reported, "... academic incentive The average [Wilmington] city high school student had a 'D' average last year and fewer than one in five seniors had plans for college." Doesn't Moffitt comment suggest that something needs to be done immediately to improve the performance of Wilmington students?

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