

Redefining U.S. environmental movement

JULIAN BOND



In 1970, Webster's Dictionary defined the word "environment" as "that which surrounds you." In 1970, what surrounded people living in urban neighborhoods were contaminated rivers that caught on fire, air pollution that prevented people from seeing across a street, crumbling tenements and skyrocketing infant mortality rates. That year, fueled by collective outrage and anger, 25 million people joined Earth Day actions around the country to demand a safer, cleaner and healthier world, starting with the deplorable condition of many of their own neighborhoods.

That fall, environmentalists defeated seven of a "dirty dozen" of Congressmen with the worst environmental records. Quickly, the Environmental Protection Agency was created, the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts were passed, and for the next twenty years, the environment was a political priority. Then, slowly, the momentum was lost. Now every scientific improvement or higher environmental standard meets unrelenting resistance from corporate interests and sometimes even our government.

Thirty-four years after the first Earth Day, the reality is that most of America's urban and working poor are struggling with the impacts of environmental factors that are no longer a funding or policy priority. Those factors, the result of social and economic neglect, have created new and frightening environmental, health and social problems - especially for people of color, urban dwellers, and children.

For example, rates of asthma attacks among city residents, especially children, are skyrocketing. The American Lung Association reports that asthma is now the leading chronic illness among children, and that by 2020, it will affect 1 in 14 Americans. Those who live in low-income areas are much more at risk; pollutants and other toxins are more common in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color where polluting industries are poorly monitored, lead paint is prevalent and schools are poorly maintained due to lack of funds.

The average U.S. public school is 42 years old, and over 60 percent report at least one serious maintenance problem. Many schools are in such desperate need of repair that they are an actual threat to our chil-

dren's health. Shrinking school budgets mean buildings are cleaned less frequently, leading to dust and mold build up, triggering asthma and contributing to poor air quality. Many schools in low-income communities are built near polluting industries, causing additional health problems in children.

These are just some of the examples of how low-income and communities of color are affected by their environment, but there are others: The low-income family that cannot find safe, affordable housing, the mother that lives in a neighborhood without parks for her children; the man who needs better public transportation to travel to the suburbs for work because most employers don't locate in the inner-city.

Now is the time to redefine the environmental movement and develop a paradigm that combines environmental justice with civil rights and community development activism. It will be by demanding equal rights, that we create environmental equality among all communities in our country.

As we near the November election, it is time to mobilize to protect and improve our surroundings and choose politicians whose job it is to implement laws and programs in keeping with those goals. Yet, the belief that one's vote does not matter is most prevalent in communities of color, where people see little connection between their day-to-day life and the vote they may or may not cast in an election.

Just ask the individuals who reach out to the urban poor and communities of color to register them to vote or sign a petition or ask for support for a candidate. People in these neighborhoods want to know what you are going to do about the abandoned lot that is a magnet for drug dealers or the run-down public housing or the lack of parks and transportation in their neighborhood. That is what they want to talk about - their environment.

This year, NAACP National Voter Fund is joining with Earth Day Network and a consortium of non-environmental partners to launch "Campaign for Communities." This coalition is made up of a broad range of partners that are working for safe schools, more parks, cleaner drinking water, affordable housing, living wage jobs and sufficient public transportation, etc. The campaign will also register and mobilize one million voters in the November election.

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POSTSCRIPTS

Black athletes leave HBCUs on bench

ANGELA LINDSAY



Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have bestowed upon us some of our community's most notable citizens.

Famed attorney Willie Gary's alma maters are Shaw University and North Carolina Central University's School of Law. National journalist Ed Bradley, of the news program "60 Minutes," graduated from Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania, and clothing designer to the stars Cary Mitchell attended Johnson C. Smith University. Yet, with a disproportionate percentage of African American athletes dominating the world of professional sports today, so few of them are products of these schools.

So, why is it that HBCUs seem to produce professionals in every other arena but sports?

Steve McNair, quarterback for the NFL's Tennessee Titans, attended Alcorn State University. Ben Wallace of the NBA's Detroit Pistons attended Virginia Union University. But for every McNair or Wallace, there are 10 other athletes like Donovan McNabb, who attended Syracuse University and is currently quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, or Vince Carter, star of the Toronto Raptors and a UNC-Chapel Hill alum. Even in North Carolina, which ranks number one in the nation with the largest number of HBCUs, Charlotte's own Antawn Jamison of the Dallas Mavericks and Jeff McInnis of the Cleveland Cavaliers are routinely snatched up by Division I schools like Duke and UNC-Chapel Hill.

Some experts say that unless these athletes are highly recruited and choose to attend an HBCU, most of which are Division II schools, they risk sacrificing the higher level of exposure to sports scouts and "TV time" available at Division I schools and could ultimately compromise their draft pick placement.

The theory is that while an athlete from an HBCU may have had an impressive college record with stratospheric statistics, scouts may determine that because he/she only played against Division II opponents, generally assumed to be of a lesser athletic caliber, he/she will not be able to adequately compete in the "big leagues"

against other athletes who were trained at Division I schools. Consequently, athletes who choose to attend HBCUs could stand to endure a longer, more twisted path to becoming a member of a professional team.

While I understand these politics associated with professional sports and laude any athlete for even considering college as an option in these days of baby ballers, it seems improbable to me that an athlete's skills would be any less super simply because of the school they attend. Their athletic prowess should still be outstanding enough to attract the requisite attention. Therefore, the duty would be on these athletes to choose to attend an HBCU, then perhaps an effective, albeit, slow, trend would emerge in which the face of professional athletics would be reflective of the schools that generate its members.

In speaking with other sports fans, I've heard it said that "black" schools cannot "afford" these athletes like top tier Division I schools can. Then, that begs the question exactly what are these schools "paying" these athletes? Is it the promise of cars, money, and academic ease that these school can offer-perks which should not be given to them anyway and is exactly what got basketball phenomenon LeBron James in trouble as a heavily recruited high school star?

Understandably, the lure of such freebies are incredibly enticing to these athletes, many of whom come from impoverished conditions and are using sports as a way to "get out of the hood." Black folk are an instant gratification kind of people. So, indeed, if these types of bonuses are thrown into the huddle of America's top high school athletes, HBCUs may not be able to compete. But they will at least have the comfort of knowing that they are accepted on more than one level rather than the one-dimensional chance that got them enrolled at the previously segregated Division I schools which would have, affirmative action aside, likely rejected them unless their academic scores were not just up to, but over par.

I know that a sweeping change in the way top black athletes are recruited and the schools they choose to attend is not likely to occur any time soon, or at all for that matter. But if it did, it would result in a slam dunk for HBCUs across the board.

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FILE PHOTO

Lured in part by the prospect of national television and being seen by professional scouts, top flight black athletes like Charlotte's Antawn Jamison enroll at large, predominantly white Division I colleges instead of historically black schools. Jamison played college basketball at UNC Chapel Hill and plays professionally for the NBA Dallas Mavericks.

Segregated schools in 2004

By Eric Wearne
SPECIAL TO THE POST

In 1953, right before the decision in Brown v. Board of Education, Atlanta Public Schools consisted of 600 schools serving 18,664 students.

Black and white students were kept apart by the government. Fifty years after Brown, APS consists of 96 much larger schools serving 55,812 students of all races, and more than three quarters of them are still in schools where one race has a 90 percent majority.

Atlanta's private schools today draw students from the same basic geographic area as APS, yet they are significantly less segregated than are the public schools.

How can this be? Aren't schools of choice supposed to be the ones that foster "balkanization" and increase racial segregation? Indeed, National Center for Education Statistics data show that almost 60 percent of Atlanta's 53 private schools have single-race majorities of 90 percent or higher. But 79 percent of Atlanta's public schools are that segregated.

Usually, students are assigned to public schools based on where they live, so, absent choice, housing patterns are reproduced in those schools. A kid's address in large part determines the quality of school he will be allowed to attend. It is hard to imagine a system that would be much more capable of keeping our public schools segregated than that. If wealthier parents become dissatisfied with their children's schools, they can pay to send them to private schools, or at least move into a district with a better public school system.

Middle- and upper-class families for years have been able to choose their children's schools based on academic reputation, safety, location and special programs. Poor parents are forced to take what they're given, unless they live close enough to a charter school or can take advantage of a private scholarship program.

Increased spending itself doesn't do much to improve schools. And while spending is not irrelevant, the idea that high-achieving districts do well simply because of money is a myth.

Clearly, simply spending more money will not by itself create better schools. The combination of poverty, the false hope that higher (and still inefficient) spending can be a panacea, and a lack of educational options within the city itself, however, is a sure way to keep poor urban children in the failing public schools to which they have been forcibly assigned.

ERIC WEARNE contributed a chapter on Atlanta's public schools for the book, "Educational Freedom in Urban America: Brown v. Board after Half a Century" (Cato Institute, 2004).

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THE BOONDOCKS

by Aaron McGruder

