

Black doctors stand in gap for better health

By Glenn Ellis
SPECIAL TO THE POST

One hundred and eleven years ago, two years after performing the world's first successful open heart surgery, Dr. Daniel Hale Williams was at the forefront of an even greater accomplishment. With the 98 year old, All-White American Medical Association (AMA) maintaining its consistent policy of excluding African-American medical doctors from membership.

Dr. Williams founded the National Medical Association (NMA). It was 1895 when the NMA was the catalyst to facilitate the ability for the growing number of African-American doctors to practice and provide the services health care to a nation of African Americans who had, up to that point been institutionally marginalized. With the advent of the NMA, America began to see the proliferation of "Black" hospitals, medical clinics, and doctor's offices, all contributing to addressing the health needs of a growing African-American population, on whom the White medical establishment had effectively turned its' back on.

The NMA just concluded its annual conference in Dallas. From the first convention 111 years ago and the Dallas convention, the medical field has undergone many changes. With the exception of Howard and Meharry universities, all the remaining medical schools for African-American doctors have closed, along with the segregated hospitals.

Yet, even though the AMA has changed its' racist policy, and now allows African-American doctors in its ranks — former Detroit mayor Dennis Archer just stepped down as its president — the NMA has never ceased to exist.

Today, there are approximately 30,000 African-American doctors in the U.S., out of more than 38 million Blacks. Clearly, most African-Americans will never have an African American doctor. To some extent, with a significant percentage of African-American doctors working in academic or corporate settings, many of them will never treat an African American patient.

The looming question now is, "Is the NMA relevant today?"

If there was any doubt, the question was answered with an astounding YES, on a scorching hot week in Dallas, Texas last week. The 2006 NMA Annual Convention and Scientific Assembly convened with thousands of African American doctors from all over the country attending. The gathering was like a Who's Who of African-American doctors, including former U.S. Surgeon General Louis Sullivan and David Satcher.

With African-American suffering disproportionately in practically every major health category, and with a similar ranking in death rates, major portions of the convention schedule reflected the focus and commitment the organization has in addressing these phenomena.

As usual, the Association of Black Cardiologists holds its conventions concurrently, one of the many powerful symposiums was a presentation by the ABC on addressing health disparities. Among the panelists presenting was Dr. Pamela Davis, who spoke about the importance of increasing participation of both African-American doctors and patients in clinical trials. In looking at disparities, Dr. Davis made a point of talking about how important it is for inclusion in trials on new drugs to make sure that new medicines are developed with the knowledge of their effectiveness on a wide segment of the entire population as possible. In spite of the intense controversy surrounding the ABC's involvement in the clinical trials of the "Black" high blood pressure medication, BiDil; the fact that the trial was almost unprecedented in ending with all patients remaining in the trial from beginning to end. This is not common in clinical trials. This fact points out one of the many benefits to African-American patients of increased participation by African American doctors.

Health disparities are the "Achilles Heel" of American medicine, and the NMA has it dead center on its radar screen. Dr. Sandra Gadson, NMA President expressed her satisfaction that, as her term ended during the convention, the National Medical Association has stayed true to its mission to improve the quality of health among minorities and disadvantaged people through, advocacy, research and partnerships with federal and private agencies.

Throughout its history the National Medical Association has focused primarily on health issues related to African Americans and medically underserved populations; however, its principles, goals, initiatives and philosophy encompass all ethnic groups.

The NMA is poised to move through the 21st century as the leading advocate for Health Disparities.

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Everybody is a Star when kicked to curb

Now that the storm surrounding the Star Jones firing (or did she quit?) has subsided a bit, I thought I would dust off the article I contemplated writing just after the incident occurred.

During the back-and-forth between Star Jones-Reynolds and Barbara "Wa Wa" Walters, the words of a famous philosopher came ringing in my head. Sly and the Family Stone recorded "Everybody is a Star" in 1970, the words of which were inspiring and uplifting. The duel between Star and Walters reminded me of quite the opposite; I thought about how some Black folks are used and then thrown away like yesterday's trash.

The words of the song, especially the title, also reminded me of a familiar saying: "What do white folks call a black person with a PhD?" "What do whites call a black person with a million dollars?" If you don't know the answer, call me or send me an e-mail.

As many black men and women before Star Jones have found out, no matter how high we think we have risen, no matter the level of our achievements, and no matter the circles in which we run, in this society, everybody — every black person is a star, a Star Jones, that is.

The examples abound where celebrities, opinion leaders, national leaders, politicians, corporate types, sports figures, and the regular man-on-the-street black folks have been "dissed," insulted, abused, both verbally and physically, abandoned, back-stabbed, put out to pasture, and castigated, after being used by persons they thought were their friends, persons they thought respected them for their talents, their intelligence, and their money.

The brothers and sisters we celebrate as top CEOs, high-ranking political figures, athletes, and civil rights leaders are all "stars" when it comes to the bottom-line.

They are stars like O.J. was, that is, until he crossed the line. They are stars like Joe Morgan was until he was confronted by the wrong white person.

They are stars like Michael Jackson was until he accused a White record exec of being a racist, and stood beside Al Sharpton while making his accusation.

They are stars like Oprah was when she did her show from Forsyth County, Ga., and that backwoods, overall-wearing racist called her a "good" n-Word, unlike those "bad" n-Words who lived in Atlanta.

The list goes on and on; so everybody is a star, just like Sly Stone said; black folks, sometimes voluntarily, get used by whites, in corporate settings, social programs, athletics, music, retailing, entertainment, and even in personal relationships, only to be thrown out at the whim of "friends" they thought cared about them.

Star Jones is just another in a long line of black men and women who believed the hype. Consider the words of Sly Stone: "Everybody is a star. Who can rain, chase the dust away? Everybody wants to shine. Ooh, come out on a cloudy day. 'Til the sun that loves you proud. When the system tries to bring you down; every hand to shine tonight."

You don't need darkness to do what you think is right." Again, those words were meant for positive reflection back during a time of great strife and a period that saw black people trying to identify ourselves. Those words can also be used today to point out how we are regarded in this country, no matter how high we get.

So, take heart, Star Jones, you are in some very good company. Everybody is a Star, and gets treated like Star Jones, in some respect, at some time or another. But, Sly Stone said a few other things too. He told us to Stand! He said, "Don't call me n — —, Whitey." He said, "Thank you, falettin' me be myself." He told us this is a "Family Affair." He gave us messages that emboldened us, messages that indeed took us "higher."

Yet, here we are today, still trying to assimilate into a society whose only regard for us is what we can do for it, and keeping us "in our place." I am not upset about the Star Jones incident. I am sure she will do just fine. I only wanted to use her example to remind us, once again, that we are headed down the wrong road in this country. Black folks had better do some of the things pointed out in those old songs if we really want to be a force with which to be reckoned.

Quite frankly, I am tired of the rich and famous crying to the proletariat about how they are mistreated. Those of us on the lower end see this kind of treatment everyday; where are the rest of you "Stars" when we need you? Considering the fact that every Black person really is a star, don't you think we should be working closer together, in support of one another? Don't you think we should be taking a collective "Stand"? I do.

Until we resolve to follow some of the simple instructions left by Sly and others, Black people will be relegated to being "Stars" but never to being independent, never to being self-sufficient, never to being self-determined, and never to being in control of anything in this country. Sorry, Star, but you have a lot of company, if that's any consolation at all.

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Small step away from a wrong pathway

Will North Carolina's new lobbying and ethics law eliminate political fundraising scandals?

The new law makes important changes, including prohibiting lobbyists from making campaign contributions to legislative candidates. It forbids lobbyists from gathering campaign checks from others and "bundling" them to give to candidates. The new law also bans most lobbyists' gifts to legislators and other state government officials.

So, will these new rules eliminate scandals?

It is a positive step, but the new law will not stop politicians from raising campaign funds from people and organizations who want some kind of help from their government.

Lobbyists will find ways that will be legal under the new law for their clients to get money to the political campaign chests of the politicians who help them or might help them.

Compared to the multi-million dollars involved in "Abramoff-DeLay" scandals at the federal level, the recent North Carolina political fundraising stories seem small potatoes at least in financial terms.

Democrats point out that the fundraising mess in Washington is a Republican responsibility. Republicans say that the Raleigh mess belongs to the Democrats.

Each party wants to use the other party's scandals to gain an advantage in this fall's elections. The Democrats want to use the Washington mess to help take back control of the U.S. Congress. The Republicans hope they can use public concern about political fundraising in Raleigh to gain control of the North Carolina legislature.

Most voters, even if they are concerned about lobbying and fundraising, are confused about which political party to blame for scandals. Many just blame "the politicians" of both major parties.

There is a problem for those of us who would like to blame only the Republicans for the Washington political corruption represented by Jack Abramoff and Tom DeLay.

When the Democrats were in charge of the Congress, they learned to use their ability to give access and favorable government treatment as a political fundraising tool.

Using their position of power, they were able to raise big money even from Republicans who wanted access and favors.

When Republicans took control of Congress, they took the Democrats' fundraising programs and "improved" their effectiveness, using them, as the Democrats before them, to protect and solidify their majority status.

Without question, Abramoff, DeLay, and hundreds of their allies refined and expanded a system in which political contributions buy access to political decision-makers. It is the kind of access that leads to favorable tax treatment, government licenses and permissions, and government contracts.

It is a mutually beneficial arrangement for the players. First, it is great for those who are rich enough to give substantial political money to support those in power in return for the kind of government action that makes them even richer. Second, it is great for the elected officials who have the power to influence government action that can help those who help with the elected officials' desperate and growing need for political cash to keep themselves in power.

It is not necessarily great for the rest of us. When our elected representatives are looking out for the people who provide their campaign funds, they cannot pay full attention to the best interests and needs of the country as a whole.

The new North Carolina legislation might not cure the political fundraising problem. But we can hope it will help us take a step away from a pathway towards an Abramoff-DeLay political culture.

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