

# PHOENIX OPINIONS-EDITORIALS

## Daring to be different and an agent for change

For the last month or so, one of the cable television stations has been featuring the movie, "Lean on Me," the story of the dynamic East Paterson, New Jersey principal, Joe Clark, who set in motion the wheels of change at Eastside High School. Just before filming for the movie was to start, I had the extraordinary good fortune to interview Clark at his base of operations--a descriptive term considering the war he was fighting to turn the school around.

As luck would have it, Morgan Freeman was visiting the school the day of the March, 1988 6:30 a.m. interview to get a feel for what he would be up against in recreating the person and spirit of Joe Clark. Meeting the two men was startling because they bear a fair resemblance to a man who was so much like Joe Clark that I commented on that physical and philosophical similarity to Clark during our interview. He replied that in ever verbose barrage of polysyllabic phraseology that is characteristic of his style, "Then he's a remarkable fellow with a propensity for pertinacious pursuit of goals that others cannot begin to comprehend." Indeed, my father, Willie E. Smith, was that, and his death on March

31, 1989 deprived our black community of an "entrepreneur extraordinaire." Before he died, he listened to the tape of my interview with Joe Clark and could not have agreed more that, for all Clark's stringent, often heavy-handed tactics, his strategy for transforming a school that was an inner-city nightmare into a safe environment where learning could take place, could not be denied.

Just as the political environment in Winston-Salem contributed to a number of difficult situations that

my father faced, so too did Joe Clark do battle with the political forces in East Paterson, N.J. Joe Clark and Willie E. Smith dared to be different, dared to have the intestinal fortitude required to essentially buck the system. The two are examples of men who believed in discipline, pride, and academic achievement.

Morgan Freeman gives an outstanding performance as Joe Clark even though the film does take certain liberties with the actual, factual events surrounding Clark's time at Eastside High School. But, that's not surprising

since the man who is a consummate believer in controlling was virtually leaning over Freeman's

anniversary of my father's death. Yet, something that they both epitomized and was not

ing, bull horn wielding "Crazy Joe"--tried to put in place at the high school he had been



## EDITORIAL

By Patricia Smith-Deering  
Phoenix Managing Editor

shoulder during the making of "Lean on Me."

Clark has moved on to more lucrative lecture engagements, and my family marks the first

fully or adequately captured in the movie deserves repeating. That is the philosophy of discipline, pride, and academic achievement that Joe Clark--depicted in the media as bat tol-

asked to save from state takeover. The following is the article I wrote from that interview for *The Minority Business Journal of New Jersey*.

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## Perception vs Reality makes for bad politics

Commentary by  
Rodney Sumler

If there is one thing my political involvement has taught me over the years, it's that black folks continue to allow white folks to decide on who our leaders are and who they want to deal with. While I have never considered myself as anything other than a black man who is committed to the community that nurtured me, thanks to the ongoing FBI/IRS investigation into my political and civic involvements and the resulting newspaper front-page, prime time television coverage, I've been anointed as a force in the black community. The apparent goal has been to turn the perception for me as a black leader into a reality in the minds of those whom I have merely sought to assist.

Whatever political influence I may have been perceived as having has been effectively sabotaged by the white media--specifically the *Winston-Salem Journal* and Channel 12 news. The paper deliberately came out with designating me as a leader to anger black

leaders with me, to isolate me, and to have them treat me like I'm

me and separating me from a lot of people. People need to stop

saw what was happened to me, some of them changed their party affil-

we're all serving the same God and working towards the same end.

Politically, people call themselves Republicans, or Independents, or Democrats. Yet, it's nothing but a label and none of the parties controls what people do or should do. People should really vote for the person, vote for the issues, and vote for the person's record and not for the party. I have learned one important lesson from my various forays into the political arena. I made the false assumption of thinking that just because you get out here and work hard and people know your name and you've done what you perceive as being a lot of good for people, that they'll vote for you or support you." But, as I found out in my bid for a seat on the City Council and as a candidate for the state House of Representatives, politics, just like life, doesn't work like that.

Although people may distort perceptions of what is, it doesn't really change the reality, only

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## COMMENTARY

By Rodney Sumler  
Phoenix Publisher

Lazarus or a leper. Channel 12 news has portrayed me as if I am on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list.

The sad fact is that by creating the perception that I am some omnipotent leader in the black community, the media has succeeded in getting the gullible to believe it's a reality and to react negatively to the bad press. Such an effective job of discrediting me has been done that few in Winston would listen to anything I would have to say or offer. It's as though the media want to see me dead politically. By painting the worst case scenario of who I am and what I am, they have succeeded in isolating

believing anything and everything that they read in the newspaper or see on the TV news. In Winston-Salem, it seems that the more educated some people are, especially black people, the more they tend to believe anything whites tell them about other blacks.

But, we give the media lots of assistance in catering to our perceptions and exploiting them. Take the perception many blacks have of a black is is not a member of the traditional party of black folks--the Democratic party. As a Republican, I've been castigated because of it and when other blacks that I had registered as members of that party

iation back to Democrat--couldn't take the heat.

We have this fear of people who are "different" from what we choose to be. But, being categorized as a Republican or a Democrat should not be an impediment to an individual's life, whether politically, socially, or personally. I think black people make a serious mistake in worrying about labels because all of us have any number of labels and tags that we put on ourselves. We have a religious label. We have a certain denomination that we believe in and we despise each other because I think my denomination is right and yours is wrong, but we all say

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