

FORUM

Shape Up African-Americans! Live But Don't Look Like Santa

It's that time of year again. Birth. Life's cornucopia is celebrated. A seasonal span when the visions of sugarplums turn up on tables in the form of large quantities of high-calorie foodstuffs: collard greens and string beans, soaked in fat back, fried pork chops, pecan pies, chocolate cakes, buttered rolls, candied yams, dressings, and smothered shoulders. The next three weeks is high season for spiced country hams and pounds of potato salads overpowered with miraculously whipped mayonnaise.

The next two weeks will see African-Americans, from all classes and persuasions, joined, at the hips, so to speak, pushing up what First Lady Clinton is calling an "alarmingly high incidence of obesity."

African-Americans are covered by all manners of social and political forces that lie behind premature and excess disease and death rates. We are mired in the everyday alarming high rates and psychological effects of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, drug abuse, crime and violence.

Then comes Christmas and Santa Claus. It is a time when African-Americans, like the majority of Americans, whatever their joys, troubles and woes, over-indulge themselves. Through the year, though, these private acts of indulgence — historically and culturally-based acts of ingesting too much of the "wrong" foods — becomes the shovel that digs the graves into which millions of black folk eat themselves. Enters the body of Santa Claus. Is this another form of black-on-black crime?

Many jokes will go around about the rotund relative who "eats more than the law allows!" Among the blessed ones who will prepare the rounds and mounds of scrumptious soul food for the holidays, African-American women are disproportionately among those who are at least 20 percent above the recommended weight levels for height and age.

Dr. Shiriki Kumanyika, an African-American and professor at the John Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, has been on the stump a long time about obesity in black women. Her research findings are the basis of the loudest call in the report that led to Shape Up America. "Obesity is rampant in ethnic popula-



tions... (especially black women)." Half of all adult black women are overweight, she finds, in contrast to 34 percent of the general population, and 24 percent of the white female adults. She discusses a number of environmental and genetic factors that put black women at "an especially high risk of accumulating excess fat." The bottom line is flavored by dietary, lifestyle, and metabolic influences.

Shape Up America is a national call to fight the public health threat posed by the relation-

ship between being overweight and a number of disabling and life-threatening diseases. For African-Americans, these include high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes and (some) cancers. Everybody should know that these are the leading causes of incapacity and death among blacks. Ironically, these fall within personal choice and influence. According to former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, who joined Hillary Clinton in inaugurating Shape Up America, obesity is second only to "another habit," that I have, which is dear to the heart of the economy of North Carolina. In addition, there are sedentary lifestyles (mashed couch potatoes?) among a people who watch more television than the general population — while eating.

Yes, Christmastide is a time to sup together and enjoy and savor



LIFT EVERY VOICE

By Dr. WILLIAM H. TURNER

the full flavor of life. But many who are sick in our community are that way for the manner by which they have consumed foods.

Only healthy ears can stand hearing the words of the sick and aged frail among us. We must be healthy not only to support our loved ones, but we must be fit, robust and vigorous to fight the challenges external to our physical person. Caesar can deny many of our rights, but not our right and responsibility to exercise and be healthy. It takes strength and stamina to bear the cross of the Christ child.

Stand Up African-Americans. Let's give ourselves and our families good health for Christmas and Kwanzaa gifts. Can this be the First Christmas when meals are cooked differently in African-American homes? Can this be the beginning of a life of moderation in eating? Life is at stake, and without life there is nothing. As Charles Brown would sing, "Merry Christmas, Baby." But, you got to be able to get down the chimney. Up with healthy diets and lifestyles!

(Dr. William Turner is a regular freelance columnist for the Chronicle.)

"Can We As Human Beings Live Together in Peace and Justice"

"Mercy, mercy me, things ain't what they used to be," was the first line of a song by the poet and singer Marvin Gaye. When it comes to our communities and the escalating levels of violence surrounding us, those words couldn't be more true.

Yet, amidst the drive-by shooting, the illegal handguns, the continuing presence of assault weapons, and always, the killings, there is hope. There are stories of people who don't get paralyzed by a crisis, they just get organized.

In an earlier Civil Rights Journal, I asked you to share with me some of the signs of hope that are springing forth in our communities and many of you have done that. I have heard from prisoners, from people in unexpected places, and from one coast of this country to another. The stories they shared are signs of hope for us all.

In Oakland, Ca. two of the nation's deadliest housing projects are now beginning to blossom. Under the auspices of the East Bay Community Recovery Project, the residents of these communities are finding once again their sense of self-esteem and pride in their communities. They have drastically cut the drug culture which once was responsible for drug trafficking, violence and even murders in their midst. Based on beliefs that everyone is born with innate resilience and a healthy inner being and that poor people have considerable survival skills, this approach trains residents to heal themselves and then heal their own communities. In addition, as more Asian-Americans have moved into these communities, the project has also worked on bringing together the African-American and Asian-American residents.

One way these two communities have come together is around gardening, a project started by one woman, Linda Schneider. By providing seeds, plants, fruit trees, manure and equipment, Schneider quickly got community residents involved in planted food and flowers in their own



CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

yards. Without any outside funding, that gardening project has now taken over abandoned buildings and converted them to useful purposes. And new friendships are blossoming along with the sunflowers and collard greens.

Sometimes all it takes is one person to be that sign of hope. In Oakland, it was Linda Schneider. In Boise, Idaho, it is Raheem O.E. Shahbazz. Boise, Idaho does not have a large African-American community, yet problems of violence exist. After several unsuccessful attempts to organize African-American men in Boise to work together in the community, Brother Shahbazz decided to become "a one man, community activist, volunteer vigil" who works with prisoners at the Idaho State Correctional Prison, teaches at a local elementary school one hour a

week and participates in the YMCA Fundamental Basketball Seminars for kids on Saturdays. He is also a full-time manager of one of the top banks in the Pacific Northwest.

As we focus on violence in our communities, we must also talk about domestic violence and sexual assault. As signs of hope, one reader, Shani Bakuba of Cambridge, Ma. pointed to rape crisis centers and domestic violence shelters and counseling programs which are found in many communities to treat the victims and provide safe space.

There's no question that violence is swirling all around us, threatening like some horrible tornado to tear down whole communities and kill those nearby. African Americans and other people of color are especially hard-hit by it. But a few weeks ago a Philadelphia suburban white student was beaten to death by a gang of his peers. A few weeks ago assault weapon bullets pierced the walls and windows of the White House. The violence is not just a question facing our American society, it is a basic civilization question. Can we as human beings live together in justice and peace?

People in Lockwood and Coliseum Gardens in Oakland would answer yes. They are signs of the hope. Hope that our communities and our people can heal themselves. Hope that our children's children will know safe and just communities, with flowers and children playing and laughing and flourishing. There's another 1970s song which says, "There's No Stopping Us Now" and that's the truth too.

(Bernice Powell Jackson is the executive director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice.)

African-Americans Must Sacrifice to Pull the NAACP out of Financial Crisis

This morning I sent off a check for \$1,000 to the NAACP. Given family obligations and the press of other expenses, that's quite a stretch for me. But it's a stretch that I, and all African Americans who can possibly afford it, need to make because the NAACP is in deep financial trouble. It has launched a fund drive to erase its debt and rebuild, and it's essential for African-Americans to step forward and help an organization that has done so much and has so much more to do.

The recent problems that led to the NAACP's financial crisis have been amply discussed, but it's clear that the organization is now trying to recapture its vital role in our society.

It deserves the wholehearted support of all Americans. The black community is mobilizing to do its part and the grass-roots campaign is taking off, led by a \$5 million pledge from a dozen church groups including all of the largest black denominations. The NAACP must live because of its historic contributions and because there is a continuing necessity for the positive role it can play in today's society.

Let's never forget that the NAACP was born at a time of legalized segregation and institutionalized oppression of black folk. Legal segregation was buried and institutional discrimination lessened thanks largely to the NAACP's protests in the streets and in the courts.

There are significant numbers of black representatives in Congress, state legislatures, and local governments today because of the NAACP's challenges to Jim Crow voting laws and its role in helping to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



TO BE EQUAL

By HUGH B. PRICE

The growing African-American middle class, which has made important gains in corporate management jobs and in small businesses, is especially indebted to the organization's efforts to remove racial barriers and open barriers and open opportunities.

But it's not just history that mandates support for the NAACP in its hour of need, but the future.

The Urban League, for example, builds bridges for our people to

cross over into society's mainstream, but it takes other strong, viable organizations to insist that those bridges be built. We need the NAACP to protests inequities, expose discriminatory practices, and mobilize people to march for justice. I sometimes hear people wonder whether there's any need for the NAACP in today's presumably more enlightened society. If anything, it's needed more than ever. Today's America is plagued by growing poverty; our cities are crumbling under the weight of social problems; economic shifts leave millions without a place in the new emerging Information-Age economy; and racism lives on, often cloaked in pseudo-scholarly tomes about race-based intelligence differences.

Instead of facing up to our problems, many people are in a state of denial, pretending they don't exist or simply uttering platitudes about "values."

And the post-election news from Washington suggests a new, callous national agenda.

All Americans must respond generously to the call to help the NAACP get back on its feet. An organization that has done so much for so many now needs help itself and we can deny it at our peril. (Hugh B. Price is director of the National Urban League.)

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