

# FORUM

## Charles Kuralt: Requiem for a Heavyweight Connector

Alex Haley once remarked, "Charles Kuralt is somebody I'm really proud to call my friend. He's a sweet man who seems to love everybody and he goes out of his way connecting us to common people, showing how amazingly uncommon they are." He added, with his eyes looking up, "that's what I tried to do in *Roots*."

Charles Kuralt understood how to reveal America at its true roots. He was so good at what he did that he almost caused me — if not for my wife — to make our kids miss a lot of Sunday School. CBS News



**Lift Every Voice**  
Bill Turner

Sunday Morning, with Charles Kuralt was an incomparable show.

What with his almost perfect Southern baritone, superimposed with jazz, classical, blues, gospel, country or sometimes a waterfall and bird-chirping music, Kuralt's reporting had a celestially inspired calming effect. "Let's watch this and make it to church."

Charles Kuralt — like Alex Haley and millions of Southerners — was first a storyteller. There was a saying among those in the Southern

Appalachian Mountains of my youth: "Southern people might can't read and write, but they sure can tell stories." Charles Kuralt was a master at the use of imagery and indirection and the straight talk that is so common in the South.

Even in death, Charles Kuralt has few peers. With all respect to Jane Pauley and Stone Phillips, who entertain us with *Dateline NBC*, it was Kuralt, starting way back in 1972, who hosted *Dateline America* on CBS radio. NBC might cover the nation, but Kuralt knew it.

His mastery of the language — almost poet-like — made one "see," on radio, a toothless sharecropper in Hot Coffee, Miss. With but a few words, Kuralt could make the man infinitely more interesting than the Queen of England or a bejeweled Hollywood starlet.

Maybe I am a bit biased — being from a bit off the beaten path



myself; but, what I liked best about Kuralt was his travels and reporting throughout rural America. "On the Road" was popular at a time when being "from the sticks" was not too popular.

He had this homespun, familiar, and informal style. Unlike today's "talking heads on the tube" surrounded by gimmicks, Kuralt sat open in a van (or on a stool in the studio). It was like he was out on your front porch, having some iced tea.

What we saw in Charles Kuralt was what we got and we probably heard more than we probably understood. His genius was underestimated because he was such a humble man. But, we liked it, for Kuralt was awarded the Emmy in 1969, 1978, and 1981.

Charles Kuralt digested the pre-WWII traits of Wilmington, N.C., born there in 1934. His brand of "Southern Comfort television and radio commentary" was brewed at UNC's distinguished school of journalism. Fitting his character, he asked to be buried on the UNC campus, but a sweet whisper from where he learned his craft.

The *Cream of the Crop* has found his "Final Rest Area," but, because he passed our way, we will always be "On the Road, with Charles Kuralt."

May you rest in peace.

*(Bill Turner is a freelance columnist for The Chronicle. He was recently selected to join the Trotter Group, a network of African American columnists. DeWayne Wickham of USA Today is President of the Trotter Group.)*

## We Have to Get Our Young People Before the Courts Do

Amid the public hysteria about "rising" juvenile crime rates and politicians' pleas for harsher penalties against young law-breakers, New York Supreme Court Justice Gloria Dabiri is starting to hear a different response to crime.

"I think more and more police officers and prosecutors are understanding that it will take more than punishment to address youth crime," says Judge Dabiri, a member of the Black Community Crusade for Children's (BCCC) Juvenile and Family Court Judges' Leadership Council. "I spoke at a National Prosecutors Association recently, and the title of the meeting was 'Combating Juvenile Crime Through Prevention.'" It's nice to see the district attorneys of major cities and others beginning to understand that it's part of the job to address this issue before our children end up in court."

Still, the government's response to juvenile crime tends to be "too punitive," Judge Dabiri notes, reflecting on much of the legislation floating around Congress. "We know the kinds of things that place kids at risk, but we aren't addressing them. We know children need adult supervision, and that we need to address truancy, abuse, and neglect. We know that we need more after-school programs that build relationships between kids and adults."

Judge Dabiri is right. Too many politicians focus on the immediate political reward for "getting tough" with young offenders. They ignore the long-term societal benefits from investing in ways to keep young people out of trouble, and turn them back into productive citizens when they do enter the court system.

Now, Congress is under pressure to pass another "tough on crime" bill targeting young people. One piece of that bill has already passed in the House, the Juvenile Crime Control Act, which provides \$500 million a year for states to punish young offenders, provides for trying more children in adult courts, and devotes not a penny to prevention. Also awaiting passage is a second House bill that threatens to undermine the Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, which is the primary grant the federal government allocates to states to run juvenile courts, with such existing conditions as states must protect truants and runaways from unjustified incarceration, and juvenile delinquents from incarceration with adults. On the Senate side, yet another bill includes certain harmful provisions similar to the two House bills. All three pieces of legislation fail to invest adequately in prevention and emphasize trying children as adults and imprisoning children with adults. A comprehensive bill, based to some degree on all three measures, is expected by midsummer.

Something is wrong with the values of a nation that would rather spend \$30,000 to lock our children up after they get into trouble and won't spend 3,000 to give them a Head Start. And something is wrong with us if we do not fight the criminalization of our youths and their need for positive alternatives to the streets: jobs, after-school programs, and recreation.

Violence is a real threat in today's society and we should be concerned about it. Children are among the most likely of all age groups to be the victims of violence. And one out of every two children murdered in America is a black child, even though black children make up only 15 percent of the juvenile population.

But we need to make sure that our concern over crime doesn't force us to forget that these are still our children. They are 10 times more likely to be victims of violent crime than to be arrested for a violent crime. Also, while violent crime by youths is still too high, it dropped 2.9 percent between 1994 and 1995, the first decline in a decade. Homicide by youths fell 15.2 percent between 1994 and 1995.

It wastes more energy, and more money, to come up with stricter punishments that it does to join forces on the measures we know reduce crime

and broaden opportunities for young people. We know that most juvenile crime is committed between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., which highlights the importance of having more adult mentors and after-school safe havens. We know that better educated youths are less likely to commit violent crimes, which stresses the need for better schools and more talented teachers. We know that even troubled youths will seek out role models, which emphasizes the importance of keeping them out of prisons and away from hardened adult criminals, and instead keeping them in schools and rehabilitation programs where they can learn from adults worth emulating.

And we know that the increase in violent juvenile crime has been driven by the easy availability of guns, which stresses the importance of urging our political leaders to pass legislation to make handguns less accessible to our children.

These are the kinds of thing we have to do if we are serious about reducing crime. We must add our voices to the list of individuals who are calling for real solutions and reject the claims of those who think the answer lies in building more prisons and sentencing children and youths to longer terms.

*(Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund, which coordinates the Black Community Crusade for Children (BCCC), whose mission is to leave no child behind and to ensure every child a healthy, head, fair, safe, and moral start in life. For more information about the BCCC, call 202-628-8787.)*



**Child Watch**  
Marian Wright Edelman

## African-American History Comes Alive

Too often in the past, the history of African Americans has been lost or hidden. Too often our history has been told by others. Too little of our history is known by others, resulting in the mistaken conclusion that African Americans have made few contributions to the life of this nation.

As you plan your summer vacations, one place you might want to include on your itinerary is the Detroit Museum of African American History. The \$39 million museum is the largest of its kind in the nation and is a great place for children — and adults — to learn about inventions and discoveries by black Americans and civil rights struggles over the centuries, as well as about African-American soldiers and business owners.

A powerful part of the museum is the simulated slave ship which shows the wretched conditions of the Middle Passage which brought our ancestors to these shores and which millions did not survive. Detroit teens posed for the plaster casts. The names of the 2,000 slave ships which carried some 20 million men and women are imprinted on the beams over your head.

The Museum is organized around eight areas of African American life: the African Memory, The Crime (Slave Trading), Survival of the spirit,

The Imperfect Union, Freedom and Betrayal; Urban Struggle, Urban Splendor; The Struggle for Empowerment and Becoming the Future.

Sometimes it uses clothing to tell the story. For instance, the uniform of



**Civil Rights Journal**  
Bernice Powell Jackson

Pullman porters, one of the first black unions, is exhibited as is the dress of a member of the Little Rock Nine, the group of students who integrated schools in that city in 1957. The gear of Dr. Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman astronaut, is there.

Sometimes the museum uses videos to tell the story. Speeches from

well-known African-American leaders can be seen and heard, as can recent footage from the Million Man March. Another video shows the poet Maya Angelou reading her inaugural poem for President Clinton.

While the federal government has spent a decade or so talking about building a national museum on African-American history, Detroit actually built one. The museum grew out of the collection of Detroit physician, Dr. Charles Wright, who began displaying African and African-American artifacts in his home in the 1960s. Black scholars and collectors from across the country were asked to contribute to the new museum after the city of Detroit committed itself to building the 120,000-square-foot museum.

Go see the Museum of African American History in Detroit. And then tell your friends and neighbors what you learned. It's a part of all of our history. It prepares us for the future.

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

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