

FORUM

'Big for a Day'



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Real joy comes not from ease or riches or from the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile."
— Sir Wilfred Grenfell

Vincent is looking for a Big Brother. The 10-year-old is a rising fifth-grader at North Hills Elementary School. After spending a half-day with him, he almost had one-me. He's a little shy. He has to be reminded to look people in the eye when he is shaking their hand or speaking to them. But he has a Magic Johnson smile and a very good memory.

I was invited to participate in "Big for a Day," a recruitment program held by Big Brothers/Big Sisters to draw attention to the organization's need for volunteers to serve as Big Brothers and Big Sisters the children in need of a role model.

Many of the children are from single-parent homes or are being

raised by a grandparent. More than 140 children share Vincent's plight. They are waiting for an adult to volunteer to spend time with them and take them places.

But most of them just want someone to talk to. A relationship with a mentor could make the difference in their young lives, the organization says.

Vincent wants a Big Brother for the most boyish of reasons. "I have three sisters," he said, bluntly. His younger sister sometimes paints a mustard mustache on his face when he is sleeping, he adds. To whom does a boy turn to in a crisis like that?

"Big for a Day" was intended to provide an "inside view" of what it's like to be a Big Brother or Big Sister. I had an advantage going in as a board member of the United Way, which provides some funding to the organization. I also have been a Big Brother.

The "Bigs" were to take the "Littles" to work. The "Littles" were to observe us "in the real world."

Vincent immediately won the hearts of the people with whom I work. They thought he looked sharp in his spit-shined wing tips, neatly pressed pants and green paisley but-

toned-up shirt.

Math is his favorite subject, but he doesn't much like the uniforms that students are required to wear. He plays the piano. His grandmother taught him, and his favorite song is "Lean On Me."

"What are you doing this summer?" was the most often asked question. "I'm going to Tennessee with my grandmother," he replied every time.

We visited Winston Salem State University and talked with one of the DJs on the campus's public-radio station. The DJ gave him a "shout out" on the air later that day. Afterward, we went to a bookstore where he picked out a book about Malcolm X.

"Why do you like Malcolm X?" I asked.

"Because he was a African-American — black — hero," he said. "He stood up for the rights of black people. I like that."

We returned to my office, where he greeted everyone at a lunch meeting I hosted. He even volunteered to escort a woman who had to leave early to the lobby. I was impressed and she was too.

It was tough hanging out with

him, though. We talked about sports, his family and his summer plans. I dreaded the question I knew would come sooner or later: "Are you going to be a Big Brother?"

I imagine that question was asked about 140 times by the youths on the list waiting for a "Big." I answered it with the skill of a politician, explaining I had been a Big Brother several years ago. He reminded me to give him my phone number, as I had promised, so that he can call me when he wants to talk.

I'm sure the other "Bigs" had similar experiences.

Talking about a waiting list is one thing. Meeting a kid on the list and spending time with him is another. There are more than 140 real children, like Vincent, on a real waiting list, waiting for a real mentor.

A media event to gain more visibility and an "inside view" turned into something more. It reminded me of the power of a little boy's desire. And the power that an adult mentor holds.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

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Race



Armstrong Williams
Guest Columnist

Much of the tension regarding skin pigmentation in this country is rooted in the cultural patterns that slavery wrought. It has to do with the not-so-subtle social hierarchies that a shared history of slavery created. These cultural divisions were sewn so deep into our social fabric, for so long, that even today white Americans have trouble imagining themselves as the "other" skin color.

For much of the past four decades, our government has consciously attempted to undo these racial hierarchies and to create a country not of blacks and whites, but of humans. To this end, the government has backed several civil rights measures aimed at engineering equality between white Americans and their former slaves. The justification for this civil rights legislation was straightforward: minorities are owed affirmative action and preferential quotas so as to rectify the overt discrimination of the past.

There is little doubt that these measures helped haul about race relations in this country. Just one thing: the emphasis of much of this civil rights legislation is on retribution, rather than conventional social activism. The major implication: blind obedience to the original civil rights

legislation might ultimately create a culture of victimization that never moves beyond those initial steps.

Four decades later, it is time to take a hard look at race relations in this country, and to reconsider whether embracing victim status for all members of a fixed group — in this case, minorities — will truly help this country to truly move beyond race. To this end, we should be willing to do what so many of our cultural torch bearers are afraid to do — examine our civil rights laws from a critical perspective so as to ensure that they do not ultimately become a straightjacket.

One of the first things we must address is school busing. Clearly, this program has not worked as it was intended. It has little or no effect on ending racism. How can we expect a child who is bused from a poor, urban area to a school in another, better neighborhood to learn how to overcome racism when the child may face it from more advantaged kids who are not bused in from poor districts? The school districts, while their hearts might be in the right place as they try to provide opportunity for the best education, may unknowingly be contributing to racism in their schools. When these children are sent home at the end of the day, they face racism in their back yards, in their streets, all around them. They may be witness to a new segregation.

Busing allows school districts to work around the problems of the inner cities, not solve them. It is an admission that nothing can be done to improve the quality of inner-city

schools. It further fuels the argument that urban area schools simply cannot be competitive enough to attract students in their own districts. We should be more concerned with the quality of our public schools, regardless of their location. Our tax dollars pay for them, yet many of us are not concerned enough with what goes on in them. Are we simply admitting our failure and accepting the idea that nothing can be done to improve our schools? We should be building each other up rather than bringing each other down in our attempt to level the playing field. But what else can be done?

We can have our children spend time with those of other races and backgrounds, exposing them to other cultures so that they can interact with each other as equals and see that they are more alike than not. The key is to start them off early, before they are influenced by stereotypes.

Sleep-overs, vacations and parties are some of the ways to maintain close contact between children. Environments where they are all treated fairly, impartially and without favor will instill in them a sense of equality which they will hopefully carry with them throughout their lives.

Adults cannot be allowed to pass on their racism to their sons and daughters. They, too, must put aside their personal prejudices, which limit them and their children, breeding contempt and discrimination. Let young people learn for themselves how other people live, how they act and how to treat those who are not like them. Let people think for themselves and make up their own minds how to live their

lives.

There are those who wish to maintain their heritage and their individual and group identities. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as it does not lead to persecution of those outside of your group. A healthy pride in one's history is a good thing, but not when it starts to impede the rights of others.

This brings us to affirmative action. We have heard the argument that minorities cannot get ahead without the assistance that affirmative action gives them, because America has not changed much since the days of slavery and of segregation. But America has changed a lot since those dark days.

What has happened since the 1960s and the Civil Rights Act is that programs that were designed to give oppressed groups a helping hand as a means of getting ahead have become ends in themselves.

Yet we must address the reason why people believe otherwise. Their perceptions are just as important as the truth. People see and believe what they want. We have to ask ourselves why are they not getting the message?

Perhaps we are not explaining it the right way, and if we cannot explain it well, it may well be we do not fully understand it ourselves.

These are just a few ideas on moving beyond race; there are many more. I don't claim to have all the answers, but the solutions laid out above are steps in the right direction. Working together, honestly and in good faith, will bring us closer to our goal.

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Caucus supports HIV/AIDS bill



Val Atkinson
Jones Street

Representative Thomas Wright (D-Wilmington) has sponsored a House bill (Bill 1405) to increase funding for HIV/AIDS prevention efforts and to direct the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services to study programs relating to HIV/AIDS prevention and care. Co-sponsoring the HIV/AIDS bill on the House side are Reps. Adams, Blue, Bonner, Boyd-McIntyre, Cunningham, Earle, Fitch, Hall, Hunter,

McAllister, Michaux, Oldham, Wainwright and Womble. North Carolina's African-American population is disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS.

It has been well documented that the General Assembly has its budgetary hands full this session. There's the budget shortfall left by the previous administration, and there are growing needs in every sector of the biennial budget. Teachers want raises, state employees want raises, the university system and community college system need to stay afloat, and something definitely needs to be done about our overcrowded K-12 system. Where will all the money come from for these needs?

And if these needs aren't met,

can we really turn our attention to HIV/AIDS? Of course we can. House Bill 1405 is asking that previously appropriated funds be allocated toward HIV/AIDS prevention. This is not asking too much.

HIV/AIDS is not our neighbor's problem, it's not a foreign problem and it's not a problem defined by anti-social behavior. HIV/AIDS is an American crisis, and HIV/AIDS is a N.C. crisis. North Carolina's African-American community is one of the leading communities in the country in need of protection from and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Rep. Wright and the other Black Caucus members should be commended for their audacious approach to this menace to our community. North Carolina's

African-American community (along with other communities) has withstood droughts, hurricanes, floods, pests, and now we have HIV/AIDS. This too shall pass, but in the meantime, we need a little help from our friends. Our friends in this case are those good souls in the N.C. General Assembly. We need support for House Bill 1405.

I would suggest that calls to your representative and senator would not be out of hand at this time. You've already done your part to support them by getting them elected. And now it's time for them to repay you by passing this critically important bill, House Bill 1405.

You may reach Val at: ValAtkinson@Prodigy.Net.

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