

Chapel Hill's summer reading selection deserves controversy

Tim Tyson's "Blood Done Sign My Name" will be in the news again next week.

On Monday afternoon (August 29) the book will be the subject of small group discussions by incoming students at UNC-Chapel Hill. It's part of the school's "Summer Reading Program."



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In recent years this program generated controversy about the books it selected. For instance, two years ago Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed" drew complaints based on the author's alleged "far left" political views. In the preceding year, "Approaching the Qur'an" prompted allegations that the university was improperly promoting a particular religion. One group filed a lawsuit to stop the on-campus discussions of the book.

So far "Blood Done Sign My Name" has not generated as much debate. So the headlines for the news stories on Monday and Tuesday might simply be "NO CONTROVERSY THIS YEAR AT CHAPEL HILL."

It would be a shame, because this book deserves to be controversial.

"Blood Done Sign My Name" is a careful and sensitive retelling of Oxford, North Carolina's encounters with some of the worst events of the struggle for civil rights in the 1960's and early 1970's. The story tells how the town and its people dealt with a brutal racial killing and the downtown burnings that were a part of the accompanying racial unrest.

In 1960 or 1970, this kind of book would have brought down a torrent of controversy that would make the stirrings about "Approaching the Qur'an" seem like a Quaker meeting in comparison. Back then, some of us were still blaming all our racial unrest on outside agitators and the Communists.

But it is 2005. Now everybody is "pro-civil rights and equal rights." The children and grandchildren of people who fought for continued segregation and white dominance now fill the Smith Center to give adoring cheers to black students who bring their team victories.

So today, it is as hard to find anyone who will admit fighting for segregation as it was, after Watergate, to find someone who admitted voting for Richard Nixon.

Even when Tyson's book opens with the forbidden, inflammatory words, "Daddy and Roger and 'em shot 'em a nigger," we read on, identifying with the victim and rejecting any connection with anyone who used the "N" word.

Since almost all of us these days claim to be "pro-civil rights," even telling the dark side of our region's history may not provoke controversy. People who might otherwise object to the book will probably keep quiet, knowing that they might be labeled "racists" if they speak up.

But wait a minute. I think the author, Tim Tyson, will be disappointed if the conversations at Carolina next week don't have sparks flying. He wants us to confront our past and deal with what it has made us.

He says, "We are runaway slaves from our own past, and only by turning to face the hounds can we find our freedom beyond them."

One part of that past has to do with the violence and burnings organized by young black men in Oxford. When we celebrate the achievements of the civil rights movement, we talk about the marches, the sit-ins, and the non-violent resistance that brought about change.

Tyson challenges our thinking. His story shows, whether we like it or not, that it was violent activity, as much as the non-violent, that led to changes in Oxford.

If we really "turn to face these hounds," this part of our history ought not to be so easy for us to confront. Like an Israeli who asks himself whether Palestinian terrorism was a major factor prompting Israel to withdraw from Gaza, we do not want to acknowledge that violence was effective in pushing us to do the "right" thing.

At a time when we are committed to a war on terrorism, it is serious business to concede that violence and the threat of more violence may have been necessary to bring about racial justice and equality in our home region.

This idea should be controversial.

Such controversy would honor an important book by a brave author who has no fear of reminding us who we were and what our history has made us.

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CIAA tournament 'Uptown Get Down' a letdown

Black business left out of loop

By Bill McCullough
SPECIAL TO THE POST

I was one of the attendees at the Aug. 10 press conference at JCSU where the official announcement was made that Charlotte will be hosting the 2006 CIAA basketball tournament...the first year of a three-year run. Podium guests included Tim Newman, Lenny Springs; Dr. Dorothy Yancy, Pat McCrorey and CIAA Commissioner Leon Kerry.

A Q&A session followed the formal presentation and this is where things got a little tainted. A local business owner astutely outlined his company's 10-year record of success in providing highly-skilled, video satellite transmission services needed for special events like the CIAA tournament's televised games and noted how he has been rejected for opportunities to service CIAA television productions.

He then asked, "Who has the authority and the will to say 'yes' to an experienced, highly successful company like mine". The question, which was deferred to Mr. Kerry by Tim Newman, appeared to have angered Commissioner Kerry, who went on the attack when he rose to answer the question.

I was personally shocked, incensed and gravely disappointed in the answer Mr. Kerry gave and the tone and style in which he delivered his response. It was arrogant, insensitive and combative; and showed a total lack of understanding about the market challenges faced by many minority-owned businesses. I know that the first response from some quarters will be that Mr. Kerry is the CIAA commissioner and in that role he represents several HBCUs, its students, alumni, etc.; and that he is also black - so how could I make this type of statement regarding him and his response?

It's easy. I work as private business consultant and much of my efforts involve assisting minority, women and other small business owners in their quest to start, build or expand successful business enterprises. Within this scenario, a substantial part of my personal and business efforts involves working to tear down the institutional, systemic and racial barriers that work to prevent or inhibit a lot of minority and small enterprises from achieving market parity and participation.

As a private business consultant, I have also been desperately trying to get information on business opportunities and the marketing processes and procedures for my company, my clients and others interested in seeking potential business related to the tournament.

Many people will think that this is all about "sour grapes," however, I would submit to you that this is about "business"...minority business in particular. As I listened to Mr. Kerry, it struck me that he sounded a lot like many of the public and majority purchasing officials I've encountered in 25 years of business who, whether intentionally or unintentionally, contribute to the struggle and plight of small minority and women-owned businesses with this type of disobliging attitude. Mr. Kerry did not offer good information, advice or assistance and appeared to be incensed by the question. As an experienced business owner, trainer, consultant and professional, I know that you don't respond to customers, constituents (the businessman that asked the question is an alumnus of JCSU which makes him a vested stakeholder on two fronts) or associates in the manner in which Mr. Kerry did.

In addition, both the city and county have provided public tax dollars for this tournament. It would be interesting to know how the mayor, county manager and the other elected officials in attendance reacted to Mr. Kerry's comments; and how this squares with all of the proclamations and sound bites they offer regarding minority business development and market parity issues. It would also be interesting to know how CIAA alumni and parents who've paid tuitions and help to build and support CIAA schools and the tournament, who may also be interested business owners, view Mr. Kerry's remarks.

Mr. Kerry owes this gentleman who asked the question an apology. The CIAA LOC and the governmental and private entities and corporations supporting the tournament owe this community a much better and defined response system for any enterprise seeking information on how they can get involved with the business opportunities associated with this tournament. The withholding of key marketing information is one of the systemic and institutional barriers plaguing minority business concerns. The city of Charlotte and the county of Mecklenburg should be held directly accountable. Every citizen should see and know that these two bodies are working to ensure equal access and opportunity in the marketplace for all of its residents, especially when public funds are involved.

News flash...this tournament and the economic opportunities associated with it needs to be about more than "Uptown," and, Mr. Kerry needs coaching on how to better handle questions from the public involving publicly-funded projects like the tournament.

BILL MCCULLOUGH is president and senior consultant at McHenry Associates in Charlotte.

Common sense, fairness needed to fund Charlotte arts

By John Tabor
SPECIAL TO THE POST

There is an elephant in the room and nobody's talking about it. The city manager put in her budget this year \$250 million worth of infrastructure projects, plus a tax increase. Council deferred it. The needs actually head toward a billion dollars. So with all of those needs and \$250 million of planned projects with no available funding for next year, spending \$150 million this year on art facilities is simply irresponsible.

I do believe we have had a significant shift towards sports oriented facilities, with the whitewater park, the arena, and the pursuit of the NASCAR Hall of Fame. And I think our future focus should be toward the arts and science facilities. But... it needs to be done with common sense, foresight, and fairness.

With that in mind, I presented a plan (following historic precedent) that would build three and possibly four facilities at a cost of \$38 million to \$50 million versus spending \$147 million of the taxpayers' money to build five. What's the difference? Common sense and fairness.

In a time that the Foundation for the Carolinas describes as the greatest private transfer of wealth in our history, we are taking a 25 year public-private partnership of funding arts buildings 50-50, to simply requiring the taxpayers pay 100 percent. Where is the fairness to the taxpayers in that?

What are competing cities doing? Nobody would research that because I assume they are afraid of the answer. So, I did the research. I looked at the last couple of cities the Chamber visited - Tampa and Nashville. Nashville has built \$40 million Frisk Museum and is building a new \$120 million Symphony Hall. The city put up \$33 million and the private sector raised \$127 million, plus another \$15 million for an endowment. Nashville taxpayers paid for 21 percent of the buildings. Tampa was 43 percent, but the ED director says the trend is toward more private participation.

The Observer recently ran an editorial promoting the city should follow Raleigh's example regarding their decision to spend \$15 million on a museum. Raleigh taxpayers will only be paying 30 percent of the cost. So if all the other cities are below 50 percent, why are Charlotte taxpayers having to pay 100 percent?

There are better solutions, but first and more importantly, Council needs to look up and see the elephant - \$250 million in unfunded road and other infrastructure projects next year.

JOHN TABOR is a member of Charlotte City Council.

