

# The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

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EDITORIAL

## Crime and breakdown of the family

*We've got to admit too many kids allowed to run rampant*

The July 4 melee uptown and a demonstration three days later by West Boulevard-area residents were unrelated by timing, but bring to focus a nagging problem facing Charlotte — a small, yet determined criminal element that makes life difficult for everyone else. That most of the people who make up this group is African American should give us a reason to pause and ponder where we've gone wrong as a society and a people.

For the second straight year, hooligans disrupted the peace in center city during the Independence Day fireworks show, which required a swift police response and numerous arrests. A few days later, low-income residents along West Boulevard carried signs and heavy hearts to a police substation demanding more accountability from law enforcement and neighbors alike.

Where's the tie-in? Both incidents are connected in that lawless thugs are responsible for such a public outcry. Political and law enforcement leaders will hold meetings to get a grip on making center city safe, and strides are being taken to make West Charlotte safer, but they can't change one basic fact: We have too many thugs who lack home training in our midst.

There once was a time back in the day when elders controlled the streets in black neighborhoods and kept kids in line. Sadly, the kids have turned the tables and parents have given their authority away through complicity of acquiescence or the economic windfall of some of their offspring's ill-gotten gains. We know relatively few black families are like that, but you don't have to go far to be painted with the same broad brush. As one relative goes, so often does the entire family.

There are many reasons why people turn to criminal behavior, if only as a one-time thrill: a mob mentality pervades during an event where thousands of people gather, or the lure of fast money in the hustling game. But overshadowing all those potential pitfalls is the deterioration of families. Without that anchor, the vessel of community is cast adrift in a sea of temptation and the results are catastrophic for African Americans. The majority of black babies are born to unwed mothers. More fathers are mere DNA donors who take a pass on parenting and lack the skills or maturity to handle the job. It's little wonder why our children act as if they've lost their minds — they haven't been given any to work with by the adults who are supposed to be looking out for them.

It doesn't have to be that way. Families have to become a beacon to our young people. Fathers need to "man up" and provide emotional stability and discipline for their kids. Mothers have to get past the anger of putting their aspirations on hold because they gave birth too soon. Extended families may need to pick up the slack for parents who can't — or won't — do right by their kids.

In a society that often looks for others for a hand, it wouldn't hurt to build bridges with schools and the business community to create job training and education models that can help young people make positive contributions to society.

The challenge isn't just Charlotte's. It behooves all of us to turn our families around before we're steered into institutionalized docks built to keep us out of the mainstream until we're useless to anyone of consequence.

## Joe Martin showed us how and why to live

A few days ago my college classmate and friend Joe Martin supervised the planting of new flowers in his yard at Lake Norman. Earlier he directed the installation of a sliding tube to the tree house he recently designed and had constructed for his grandchildren.



D.G. MARTIN

On July 4, the flowers brightened the yard, the children enjoyed the new sliding tube, some older children and brave adults tried out the new water toys, and everyone enjoyed the fireworks.

It was almost the same as if Joe were still there.

Twelve years ago Joe learned that he had Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), which gradually but certainly robs its victims of their ability to move and ultimately takes their lives.

Adjusting to life with ALS would be an awesome challenge for anyone. But Joe had been so active and energetic that it must have been even more difficult for him. He had helped his brother Jim win election as governor in 1984. Then, as a senior executive with Bank of America, he helped guide Hugh McColl through the thickets of mergers, growth, and corporate citizenship.

By his honest, wise, and practical counsel, Joe gained the trust and confidence of Governor Martin, Chairman McColl, and many others. Then he pushed them for active efforts to strengthen communities and expand opportunities for minorities and women. People called him the conscience of the bank-and-the community.

When we learned of Joe's illness, we thought it was such a shame that his powerful and influential voice would be stifled. We should not have worried.

After he became ill, Joe was determined to communicate even more openly than before about matters that concerned him — education and race relations. He found that his condition gave him more leeway to confront important issues forcefully.

"Maybe I have an advantage over you," he told me. "Nobody is going to hit a man in a wheelchair so I can talk a little more

## THE AXE FALLS...



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## Bruce Gordon hits the numbers

Next month, Bruce Gordon will celebrate his first year as president and CEO of the National Association for the



GEORGE E. CURRY

Advancement of Colored People. In less than a year, Gordon has done something no other NAACP president or board chair has done in more than

50 years — he has told the truth about the organization's anemic membership numbers.

When I began covering the NAACP in the early 1970s for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Executive Director Roy Wilkins and his successor, Benjamin L. Hooks, would boast that with 500,000 members, the NAACP was the oldest, largest and most powerful civil rights group in the world. But Hooks — and the chief executives that followed him — continued to lie about the size of the volunteer organization. Finally, Gordon has acknowledged that the venerable organization has a membership of less than 300,000. He won't say how many members shy of 300,000, but other NAACP sources say the figure has fluctuated between 150,000 and 250,000 over the past three decades.

The NAACP has had various membership drives over the years and for some reason, they expected the public to believe they had a half-million members. When they

weren't having membership drives, they were claiming 500,000 members. At the end of each drive, the figure reported to the public would still mysteriously remain at 500,000. The Baltimore Sun did some research and discovered that the NAACP has been claiming 500,000 members since 1946. For 60 years, it has been telling the same lie.

It wasn't like top officials didn't know the actual numbers. My friend DeWayne Wickham, who has been researching a book on the NAACP, came across a memo written by Benjamin Hooks stating that as of November 30, 1982, there were 178,000 members. Hooks made a report to the executive committee of the board on December 17, 1982 citing those figures. Hooks and Board Chair Margaret Bush Wilson clashed over a number of items, including the low membership numbers and some questionable fiscal practices. While working in St. Louis, I broke the story in 1983 that she had suspended Hooks after a very heated board meeting at which Hooks had to be physically restrained. The board overturned Wilson's action and later refused to re-elect her to the board. As leaders came and went, the membership lie remained a fixture.

Some fear that by disclosing that the NAACP does not have the numbers it has claimed, the organization's clout might be diminished. To the contrary, by having the

courage to tell the truth, Gordon can build on his first year in office and embark on a membership drive that exceeds 500,000. In fact, by the time the NAACP celebrates its 100th birthday in 2009, Gordon hopes to have at least 1 million certified members on the rolls.

It is Black America, not the NAACP, that should be embarrassed that with a population of 38 million African-Americans, less than 300,000 are dues-paying members of the NAACP. Over the years, many African-Americans know that without the work of the NAACP, the official barriers of segregation and second-class citizenship would not have crumpled. And in local communities throughout the nation, when there is a police brutality case, often the victim's first action is to contact his or her local NAACP chapter.

Al Sharpton was correct when he said that despite all the criticism leveled at today's civil rights leaders, when there is a major issue in the black community, those same civil rights organizations are our only source of dependable support. They, in turn, need and deserve our support.

Supporting the NAACP does not mean we can't remain active in other arenas. I think one of the greatest challenges facing the civil rights movement is finding a way to integrate other Black professional groups into the leadership structure and relying on their area of exper-

tise. Civil rights groups should be working in concert with the National Bar Association, for example, to address criminal justice issues. The National Association of Black Journalists should be working with civil rights organizations to expose and challenge negative images of African-Americans on TV and boycotting sponsors of the lily-white Sunday morning talk shows. Financial literacy programs should be vetted with the Urban Financial Services Coalition, formerly known as the National Association of Urban Bankers. In other words, let the experts in a particular area lead the way.

To their credit, Jesse Jackson, Bruce Gordon, Al Sharpton and National Urban League President Marc H. Morial have been working closely on major projects, such as returning displaced residents to New Orleans and pressuring Congress to renew key sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. They should now take that next step and systematically bring more Black organizations into the fold. If that happens, we will become an even more formidable force. And we would have done that by standing on the shoulders of the NAACP.

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## Voting rights deserve everyone's support

On May 2, a broad array of members and all the leaders of the House and Senate, Republicans and Democrats alike, gathered at a press conference on the East steps of the U.S. Capitol to announce,



U.S. REP. MEL WATT

with great fanfare, the bipartisan and bi-cameral introduction of the Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006. All the House and Senate leaders pledged swift consideration and passage of the bill.

Acting expeditiously to deliver on the pledge, the House Judiciary Committee reported the bill favorably to the full House by a vote of 33 to 1. The move toward prompt passage of the bill came on an abrupt halt, however, on the day the bill was scheduled to be considered on the House floor.

A few Republican members managed to coerce their leadership into pulling the bill from the House floor, claiming that they had been unfairly excluded from the process that produced the bill. This small group, led by

Reps. Westmoreland and Norwood of Georgia, is misleading the Republican leadership and using this claim as a smokescreen for their ideological objections to the Voting Rights Act. We must confront them. We must insist that the Republican leaders not allow their extreme elements to be the voice of their party and delay consideration and passage of this important bill. The claim made by these members that they were excluded from the process is unfounded and their ideological position is extreme.

The bi-partisan, bi-cameral press event surrounding the introduction of the Voting Rights Reauthorization and Amendments Act was possible only because it had been preceded by months of hearings in the House Judiciary Committee (a total of 10 hearings at which a legislative record of more than 12,000 pages had been amassed) and by painstaking, bipartisan discussions to reach agreement on the contents of the bill. After the bill was introduced, both the House and the Senate Judiciary Committees continued to have additional hearings on the bill.

During the House Judiciary Committee hearings, the

Chairman requested and received unanimous consent to allow members of Congress who do not serve on the Judiciary Committee to participate in the hearings. This unanimous consent was important.

- It allowed members of the House who were not on the Committee to be much more involved than normal in the process; and

- It allowed reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act, historic legislation for Republicans and Democrats alike, to be considered with broad, bipartisan input.

Rep. Westmoreland, who is not a member of the Judiciary Committee, actually questioned witnesses during the House Judiciary Committee hearings. Before the House leadership abruptly pulled the bill, the Rules Committee had also authorized both Rep. Westmoreland and Rep. Norwood to offer amendments.

It is clear that some Republican members are simply using the claim that they were excluded from the process as an excuse for trying to derail the bill.

Rep. Norwood claims not to oppose the Voting Rights Act. Instead he claims to be concerned that jurisdictions with

long and documented histories of denying equal voting rights to African Americans should not be singled out for special legal scrutiny (the requirement to obtain "pre-clearance" of voting changes from the Justice Department or the federal court before the changes can be implemented) when other jurisdictions that have been guilty of discrimination more recently are not subject to such scrutiny.

It is precisely the decades long, documented history of discrimination that the Supreme Court has held is constitutionally necessary to justify affirmative, special treatment (such as the requirement to obtain Justice Department or federal court pre-clearance) to assure that such discrimination does not continue and to redress the continuing effects of such discrimination.

It is time for Congress to make the same moral decision on the Voting Rights Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006. The Act merits passage because the record demonstrates that the work of assuring that every citizen has the right to vote in our democracy is still incomplete.

REP. MEL WATT of Charlotte is chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus.