

Back at the lunch counter again?

Written by Scott Gray, MUL President/CEO
Tuesday, 03 April 2012 14:21

We are living in times when progress for communities of color seems to be going in the reverse. Yet, we have come so far -- more of us have advanced degrees and higher paying jobs; more of us own homes and are living in gated communities. But we seem not to have noticed that our youth are under attack; that there are huge pockets of unemployment and joblessness in our community. Racial profiling and violence continue to plague us in our neighborhoods, as illustrated by the senseless shooting of young, black and unarmed Trayvon Martin in Florida. Through it all, messages, resources, and programs have become watered down and the plight of our people has been given the cold shoulder.

Now more than ever, our nation is in need of a movement – a force with the visibility and the influence to bring people together. I believe the Urban League is that movement, and I believe our work is more relevant today than ever -- especially as our global society continues to expand.

The 2012 State of Black America Report

Recently, I attended the launch of the National Urban League (NUL) 2012 State of Black America (SOBA) report, appropriately named, "Occupy the Vote to Educate, Employ and Empower." Without question, 2012 finds people of color not only in a struggle to maximize educational opportunities and to access jobs, we now find ourselves battling to retain the right to vote as calls for registration restrictions, voter id, shorter voting hours, curtailing early voting and other penalties restricting the registration process are pending in some 27 states.

Our rights are being threatened all around the country, and Minnesota is no exception.

The Importance of the State of Black America (SOBA)

Since 1976, the SOBA has been published annually by the National Urban League. Using facts and research, the SOBA provides a blueprint for solving many of the disparities and life issues faced by communities of color.

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The SOBA uses what it calls an Equality Index to compare the progress of Black and Latino Americans to that of White Americans on issues such as income, homeownership, health insurance and education. In light of all the uncertainty, hardship, stress and strife that abound in the lives of African Americans today, the 2012 SOBA is particularly somber.

The 2012 National Urban League Equality Index documents significantly reduced minority voter registration and voter participation in the 2010 mid-term elections. This lost ground in civic engagement is offset by modest gains in education and health. While education can serve as a pathway to economic self-sufficiency and a better life, the 2012 Equality Index suggests that there are barriers along this path for African Americans and Latinos. For Black America, despite an education index of nearly 80%, the economic index hovers around 56%. For Hispanic America, the story is similar – the education index is about 76%, while the economic index is only 61%. This data tells us that in our capitalistic society while some educational gains are occurring, wealth accumulation, access to and the maximization of economic opportunity are not so forthcoming.

Sadly, the wage and wealth gaps between people of color and whites in 2012 is mushrooming out of control, impacting what over time has been labeled as the poor, the middle and upper classes. Economic erosions that the Great Recession caused in the employment, housing, and financial sectors are shattering our yester year gains mercilessly.

While documented facts and at times stereotypical fiction were discussed at this year's launching of the SOBA, a deeper sense of urgency filled the room. Instead of focusing on progress, it became apparent that we must strategize on how to stop the regress. Will disenfranchisement continue to be state of our community? Can we overcome the alarming gaps?

Has a 21st Century Defining Moment Arrived?

Most compelling was a comment made by panelist Reverend Lennox Yearwood, President and CEO of the Hip Hop Caucus, author of "The Rise and Fall and Rise Again of Jim Crow Laws." His statement filled the room and still dominates my thoughts today.

"This is our lunch counter moment. If we don't get it right, it will have catastrophic consequences in the next 10 years," said Rev. Yearwood.

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If we as a community don't get involved in the political process, if we don't occupy the vote, if we don't stop the foggy politics of voter id the regression will continue. As progress in our community continues to be threatened, we know it is time for serious change and yet we have remained lethargic. Where is the passion, support, anger, frustration, unity...?!

Is this a lunch counter moment? Have circumstances escalated to a point that if we as a community do not collectively respond intentionally and strategically right now, the future for us and next generation becomes bleak? What is it going to take for us as a nation to realize that adequately investing in communities of color strengthens America as a whole?

From my vantage point, this is indeed a lunch counter moment, not just for Black America or Latino America, but for the United States of America. As international motivator Les Brown says, "each day we must fight for the positive things we want in our lives, for when we do not, the things that we do not want will overtake us." With that in mind, I say we must harness our diverse skill sets and intellect, our inventive thinking, replicable solutions, and our collective energies in quest of the greater good.

NUL SOBA: A Barometer; A Catalyst for Human Development Solutions Locally and Nationally

The SOBA offers solutions to the challenges that face us as a nation. The truths it uncovers are not sugar-coated, but despite many of its dire conclusions the SOBA should not be viewed as a doom and gloom publication. In fact, it should be used as a valuable tool by decision makers and advocates in all areas of public policy. It can also help community-based agencies plan their programmatic responses to the needs of the people they serve. The Minneapolis Urban League uses SOBA information to design and execute its program service delivery model for the Twin Cities. A current innovative strategy under development includes our 13th Grade Initiative, which is designed to equip young adults ages 18 to 26 with the kind of customized vocational and technical upskilling that will prepare them for careers in emerging job sectors.

If we are to reverse the trends that suggest that Black America is regressing instead of progressing, it is imperative that each of us be active, engaged, and knowledgeable participants in the process of change. With so much at stake for our future, the most important thing we can do right now to make change happen is to register for and occupy the vote! The Minneapolis Urban League is at the lunch counter daily serving as a catalyst for change, delivering programs and services that transform lives. Will you join us there?