



CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction/History Section

Graduation is commonly thought of as the act of receiving a degree or diploma. But within the African American experience, this phenomenon represents more than the conferring of a diploma or degree, it has represented a rite of passage, the promise of expanded opportunities and a spirit of transcendence over notions of racial and cultural inferiority.

Contemporary celebrations in the form of Graduation Sundays have, in many cases, expanded to include the acknowledgement of academic achievement by young people ranging from pre-school age to post-Baccalaureate. For example, most churches have moved beyond the more traditional gifts of the white Bible for female high school graduates and black Bibles for males to also include scholarships and other types of book awards. Regardless of the type of commemoration, the celebration of Graduation Sunday represents an acknowledgement of our belief in the power to overcome that dates back to the achievements of enslaved and free blacks in the nineteenth century.

In the years prior to and after the Civil War, the advancement of literacy became an important thrust within the black community. There was a strong belief that education equated to advancement and elevation of a race whose skin color was a constant reminder that their role in the American Dream was that of slave.

Although higher education was beyond the reach of most slaves, free blacks in the North and South aspired to education beyond elemental schooling. In 1826, the first African

American known to have received a college degree graduated from Amherst College in Massachusetts. That student was Edward Jones. John Russwurm graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine the same year. In 1833, Oberlin College became the first U.S. college to open its doors to blacks as a general policy. It also was the first to admit women. But white colleges were slow in opening their doors to black students, so the responsibility rested with emerging black colleges. Before the Civil War, two black colleges were established—one in Pennsylvania, Lincoln University (1854), and Wilberforce University in Ohio (1855). These colleges, along with Oberlin and a number of other small colleges, educated some the earliest teachers who would go to the south and define education for the newly free after Emancipation.

Despite the fact that many southern states had outlawed teaching slaves to read and write, in the initial years following Emancipation, newly freed slaves throughout the region demanded formal education. From the beginning, the Black Church served as one of the conduits for the implementation of schools. Most of these early schools were called “Freedmen Schools,” and were sometimes operated by literate black men and women who came to the south as missionaries and teachers. The Freedmen’s Bureau was instrumental in advancing the education of newly freed blacks. It primarily assisted in renting spaces for classrooms, provided books and transportation for teachers and in areas where the opposition against educating blacks grew violent, provided military protection for students and teachers.¹ It allocated \$5 million to freedmen’s education and was instrumental in starting some of the black colleges that emerged during the years 1865-1881.

Even after the advancements of Reconstruction disappeared in racist, political backroom deals, denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and northern aid societies continued to demand and fight to sustain the freedmen’s schools that had developed under the policies of Reconstruction. Their efforts were met with much opposition that ranged from violent attacks on individuals and institutions to legislation that advanced a segregated public school system that poorly financed schools that serviced the black community. Nevertheless, community-based public schools as well as black colleges, which by 1900 had increased in number significantly, continued to provide substantial education and training for generations of African Americans who have significantly impacted the world. Despite growing drop-out rates and the difficulty that many African Americans have affording higher education, the attainment of the high school diploma and college degree are still viewed within the community as being the path to advancement and expanded opportunity.

II. The United Negro College Fund

The United Negro College Fund (UNCF) celebrates its 65th year in 2010. The UNCF plays a critical role in enabling more than 60,000 students each year to attend college. It provides operating funds for its 39 member colleges, all of them small, liberal arts institutions, making it possible for them to offer their students 21st century academic programs while keeping their tuitions to less than half the average of other private colleges. It also administers 400 scholarship and internship programs, so that even

students from low-and moderate-income families can afford college tuition, books and room and board.

How did this organization that has helped educate so many begin? In 1943, Dr. Frederick D. Patterson, president of what is now Tuskegee University, urged his fellow black college presidents to raise money collectively through an “appeal to the national conscience.” The letter he wrote follows:

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Southern Viewpoint
By Dr. F.D. Patterson
Pittsburgh Courier
Saturday, January 30, 1943

Would It Not Be Wise For Some Negro Schools To Make Joint Appeal To Public For Funds?

One of the most severe catastrophes of the present war, so far as the American people are concerned, is what is happening to our private colleges throughout the length and breadth of our nation today. They are receiving a double assault- that which comes from the loss of the majority of the male student population and that which comes through inability to receive adequate support through the taxing program now necessary to fight this war and to insure the broad social programs upon which this nation has engaged for the past seven or eight years.

If this is true of private colleges in general where it may be said that these colleges have a definite constituency upon which they place a financial claim, the situation is trebly more grave with the Negro colleges of a private nature which heretofore have relied largely on gifts from substantial members of the white race for their support and maintenance. There is occasion therefore for serious alarm as to what may happen to such institutions as Atlanta, Fisk, Dillard, Morehouse, Hampton and Tuskegee to say nothing of a large number of smaller church schools.

Is Public Interested?

The handwriting is on the wall so far as substantial northern support is concerned. The question remains as to whether or not these institutions have sufficiently impressed their worth on the general public and there has been sufficient growth in the public conscience to permit the quality of widespread, if small, individual generosity that is necessary to offset the substantial gifts of the past.

The general public probably does not realize that most of the substantial progress for human betterment has come through the aegis of private and charitable institutions. In the case of education the freedom to experiment and blaze new trails was a pioneering service responsible for much of the progress we know in

this field today. Even now, this service is needed because of the more or less fixed pattern which governs the educational programs of most publicly supported educational institutions. In not a few instances the political pot boils incessantly that anything beyond the merest traditional routine is out of the question.

Unified Appeals

Private colleges for Negroes have carried the brunt of our educational effort for the better part of this experience. They yet educate to the extent of their means nearly 50% of those who receive college training. They have provided the bulk of the educational leadership administering to colleges both public and private. They, too, have pioneered in areas, until recently, hardly possible in few if any state supported institutions.

These Negro institutions may well take a cure from the general program of organization which seems to involve most charitable efforts today. Various and sundry drives are being unified with a reduction in overhead for publicity and in behalf of a more purposeful and pointed approach to the giving public. The idea may not be new but it seems most propitious at this time that the several institutions which they are spending for campaign and publicity and that they make a unified appeal to national conscience.

How to Split Gifts

The first question which naturally arises is who will get how much of the funds collected. The only reasonable way to handle this would be to work out certain range limits of individual budgets and then see that the given percentage of a dollar that went to any institution was in terms of this range in its ratio to the whole. If there is included approximately ten institutions are included this should not be a too difficult mathematical problem. A given institutional range could be determined for a base period similar to that used in the cotton allotment program so as to be sure that a fair estimate of the operating budget is taken.

Negroes Should Start

Such a campaign might well begin with Negro people of America. There are few of us who have any sort of employment who haven't enough intelligence and interest, I am sure, to appreciate the importance of such a program to these institutions of higher learning. The fact that all types of education would be involved would overcome the objections which might result if a single institution were to make an appeal. In addition to this there would be the savory feeling that this contribution would be made so that a large number of individuals would benefit regardless of their educational choice.

It is also possible that by starting with the Negro people in a campaign of this kind each individual institution could continue to appeal to the donors and special friends it had developed over a period of years. The nominal contribution of one dollar per person could be sought over this wider range without any important

conflict. At least during these critical times, a unified financial campaign for several Negro colleges seems to be an idea worth toying with.

The next year, on April 25, 1944, Dr. Patterson, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune and others incorporated the United Negro College Fund with 27 member colleges. Early supporters of the UNCF included President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. That first effort raised \$760,000, a sum that would be worth approximately \$8.6 million today.

In 1972, Forest Long, an executive at Young and Rubicam, a renowned ad agency, created the UNCF tagline, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” The tagline has become one of the most recognized slogans in advertising history. Thank goodness for groups such as the United Negro College Funds and for all of the graduates they have produced and continue to produce.

III. Autobiographical Graduation Testimony

I could hardly believe that I had made it as I processed with the other thousands of students who were graduating from Ohio State University that day in June. The journey to Ohio State had been a circuitous one as this was never my dream. Yes, I did have desires to go to college. My parents had instilled that in my brothers and me from the very beginning, and growing up nothing mattered more than your grades. My parents supported our extra-curricular activities of sports and music, but there was a spoken understanding that we would go to college! So there were no “real” aspirations to be the next Janet Jackson or Bo Jackson. It was understood that Carolyn and Robert’s children were going to college.

It was years before I discovered why my parents were so determined that we would go to college. I never knew that they both had aspirations to attend college, but were sidetracked by certain life situations. My maternal grandmother died when my mother was fifteen. As the oldest child, she took responsibility for her younger siblings. Upon graduating from John M. Langston High School, one of the all-black high schools in my hometown of Danville, Virginia, my mother planned to enroll in Bluefield State College or West Virginia State College. My understanding from my mother’s sisters is that she even received scholarships to attend these schools, but my grandfather refused to sign the papers. So my mother’s dreams of attending college were dashed. My father had been born the seventh of nine children and was too poor to even think of college. In his case, going to work after high school was his only means of escaping the rabid poverty in which he grew up. Despite these disappointing situations, they worked hard and instilled in their children a love of God and an understanding that education was an equalizer and the road to opportunities.

So when all of my high school friends decided to enroll in the technical/vocational curriculum track during our first year, I knew that that was not an option for me. Instead, I struggled through foreign language classes and a geometry course that still is a source

of nightmares and regrets. But I made it through, and was one of a few black students ranked in the top 10% of my high school graduating class.

I enrolled in Virginia State during the fall of 1991, and I had no idea that the next four years would be an academic and personal journey to a life of which I had never dreamed. What propelled me the most through the many obstacles that I encountered during those years was the community support I received. I received scholarships from fraternal organizations such as the Prince Hall Free Masons and the local chapters of black sororities. And just when I thought I wouldn't be able to cover all my education expenses, I would receive a check from my home church or a call from some local church in search of a pianist to lead their youth choir and thereby providing me with needed income. It was during those times that I was reminded of God's grace, and that I wasn't simply getting an education, but following the path God had ordained for me.

I decided to try graduate school, and in the fall of 1991 I moved to Columbus, Ohio and enrolled in the MA program in music history. To say that the next six years were difficult is an understatement. I took as my personal mantra "Never let them see you sweat," and I was encouraged by the letters of my great-Aunt (my grandfather's sister) and my great-grandmother who reminded me of how she had not had the same opportunities and that she was proud of me. It all helped, as in 1993 I received my MA in Music History and, in 1997, my Ph.D.

I'm happy to say that my dissertation and push for the program to be more inclusive changed the culture of the department. Most of all, on the day that I received my doctorate, my great-grandmother, my grandmother's sister, my mother and niece were witnesses. It was profound to me that five generations of women within my family were alive to witness this significant event. Nothing has meant as much to me, and I see a passion for education in my niece who is now a teenager and talking about what colleges she wants to attend.

Today, every morning I have the pleasure of standing in front of students and lecturing about the history and merits of African and African American music. It's like a dream come true! An education or a degree is a not just a means to an end or a better job, but the first step on a life journey that can take you anywhere.

IV. Stories

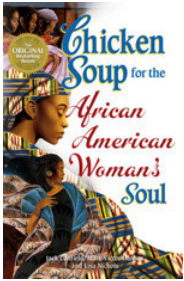


(a) In his autobiography Up from Slavery, Booker T. Washington discusses the impact that education had on the lives of the community in which he grew up and also on his life. While we know him as one of the important African American political leaders of the early twentieth century, few know of his experiences in trying to obtain an education. Chapter two of his book details Washington's intense desire to attend Hampton Institute (now University) by any means necessary, even if that

meant walking more than 500 miles. His tenure at Hampton not only inspired him to advance his race, but also served as a template for his founding of Tuskegee Institute years later.

The following is an excerpt from Up from Slavery:

This experience of a whole race beginning to go to school for the first time, presents one of the most interesting studies that has ever occurred in connection with the development of any race. Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education. . . It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn.²



(b) The following is an excerpt from the story “The Graduation” written by Bernetta Thorne-Williams and featured in the book, Chicken Soup for the African American Woman’s Soul.

The year was 1945 and Ruth Alston was about to embark on a journey that would forever change her life and affect the lives of her descendants, just as the plight of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman had affected the next generation of young black women born into freedom because of their determination. Ruth had waged a battle despite having to walk three miles alone in the early morning hours through dirt roads full of haunts. She would then stand and wait for the bus to come and transport her the remaining ten miles to the only colored high school in the area. It was during Ruth’s sophomore year that Elsie Louise Smith had moved a mile from her on the old Jordan farm. Elsie shared her desire to obtain her high school diploma. Each morning Ruth would strike out on that one-mile journey and Elsie would watch for her from the window to round the bend, then she would head out to meet her. Together they had endured the scorn and laughter of their peers, those who had dropped out, stating that it was ‘too difficult.’³

V. Songs That Speak to the Moment

To become a graduate, especially at the college level and beyond, requires belief in one’s self. The song, “I Believe I Can Fly,” is a mantra that all graduates know at some level. The song “Black Butterfly” by Deniece Williams speaks of the graduate who has moved through all of the obstacles that stood in their way to their moment of achievement. In it, Williams also encourages all who achieve to “tell your sons and daughters what the struggle brings. Black Butterfly, set the skies on fire.” As God told Joshua, your success has been granted; now graduate, go and soar. The final song, “We’ve Come this Far by Faith,” is a traditional song of the African American church. It gives credit for all achievements where it rightfully belongs, to God.

I Believe I Can Fly

I used to think that I could not go on. And life was nothing but an awful song
But now I know the meanin' of true love. I'm leanin' on the everlasting arms
If I can see it then I can do it. If I just believe it, there's nothing to it
I believe I can fly. I believe I can touch the sky
I think about it every night and day. Spread my wings and fly away
I believe I can soar. I see me running through that open door
I believe I can fly, I believe I can fly. I believe I can fly

See I was on the verge of breakin' down. Sometimes silence can seem so loud
There are miracles in life I must achieve. But first I know it starts inside of me oh
If I can see it then I can be it. If I just believe it, there's nothing to it.⁴

Black Butterfly

Morning light, silken dream to flight.
As the darkness gave way to dawn
You've survived, now your moment has arrived.
Now your dream has finally been born.

Chorus:

Black Butterfly, sailed across the waters.
Tell your sons and daughters
what the struggle brings.
Black Butterfly, set the skies on fire.
Rise up even higher
So the ageless winds of time can catch your wings

While you slept, the promise was unkept.
But your faith was as sure as the stars
Now you're free, and the world has come to see
Just how proud and beautiful you are.

Chorus

Let the current lift your heart and send it soaring
Write the timeless message clear across the sky
So that all of can read it and remember when we need it
That a dream conceived in truth can never die
Butterfly

Cause now that you're free and the world has come to see
Just how proud and beautiful you are

Chorus

Fly

Butterfly
Yeah, yeah, yes
Fly⁵

We've Come This Far by Faith

Chorus

We've come this far by faith
Leaning on the Lord
Trusting in His Holy word
He never failed me yet
Oh' Can't turn around
We've come this far by faith

(Repeat)

Verse

Just the other day, I heard a man say
He did not believe in God's word
But I can truly say, the Lord has made a way
He's never failed me yet

Chorus

Oh can't turn around
We've come this far by faith.⁶

Notes

1. "Freedmen's Education during Reconstruction." The New Georgia Encyclopedia. Online location: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-634>, accessed 4 January 2010
2. Washington, Booker T., W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson. Three Negro Classics: Up from Slavery. The Souls of Black Folks. The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. New York, NY: Avon Books, 1965. pp. 44-45.
3. Thorne-Williams, Bernetta. "The Graduation." Chicken Soup for the African American Woman's Soul. Ed. Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen and Lisa Nicols. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2006. pp. 265-269.
4. Lyrics to R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly." Online location: <http://www.elyrics.net/read/r/r.-kelly-lyrics/i-believe-i-can-fly-lyrics.html> accessed 4 January 2010
5. Lyrics to Deniece Williams' "Black Butterfly." Online location: <http://artists.letssingit.com/deniece-williams-lyrics-black-butterfly-qmj1gs3> accessed 4 January 2010
6. "We've Come This Far by Faith." African American Traditional.