

Igniting Excitement for Academic Excellence

Thank you once again for your gracious honor in naming me the recipient of the 2007 “ Igniting Excitement for Academic Excellence” Award. First and foremost, I want to give thanks to my wonderful parents , Elsie and James. Both spearheaded vibrant personal quests for personal dignity even as German submarines caused darkened lights on the Virginia coast and Thurgood Marshall shepherded the Supreme Court in Brown versus Topeka. As a youngster, I became enraptured by the perennial basket-ball championships of daddy's school, the Fairmont Heights basketball team. Coach Ken Freeman always seemed to find magic in the heart of his teams that ignited a desire to excel. I was enchanted by the musical spell cast by Sidney Forrest, my clarinet mentor still. I remember riding the D.C. Transit to DuPont circle, just a block away from Thomas Circle, crowned with a glorious equestrian statue of the great General George H. Thomas who marshaled newly minted African-American soldiers, cooks , laborers and former slaves into a formidable defensive posture at the 1864 “ Battle of Nashville,” thereby securing Sherman's “ March to the Sea.”

As a student at Michigan State, I heard both Malcom X and Martin King speak and thrilled to the magnificent fights of Muhammed Ali. I spent many cold nights deep in conversation with companions, now distinguished alumni of Michigan State challenging perspectives and ideas about the role of the university, constitutional government, and the classical arts with respect to the dignity of the African-American citizen. I was fortunate to be accepted in the U. S. Navy Band, Washington, D. C. in 1966 and continued my clarinet studies with Anthony Gigliotti, clarinet principal with the Philadelphia Orchestra. I loved the warm velvet of his sound and his personal warmth; his history of support for African-American students buoyed me. Then, as now, you chose wisely in the individuals and companions you trusted. At Catholic University, I decided to excel as a student. I made a conscious decision to challenge the darkness of despair and failure, decide to compete full throttle. School had always been fun for me; my sisters and I love to read to this day. Books had always been companions of the family. If you were bored, you could find a wall of titles. There, I had found W.E.B. Dubois' “ Black Reconstruction in America.”

When I came to Memphis, in 1972, the challenge broadened; how to deepen and maintain my own talents while wedging open a door for many trampled under the hooves of Nathan Forrest and subsequently raked by the talons of Jim Crow. My new woodwind colleagues at the University gave me exceptional counsel and support; they were and are some of the South's finest. Many feel that the classical art of the West is inherently racist. I see the harmonies, the acrostics, the rhythms, myths, and legends as a kaleidoscope of designs, ideas, costumes, and patterns; a feast of perspectives on an international scale, a thousand bridges between cultures, a palette on which new masterworks will root. For me, the responsibility of the arts, especially the classical arts, is to illuminate the human condition, extend open palms to all, thereby dignifying each.

Out of that dilemma, grew the UNITUS website which houses computer tutors, student information, and arts teasers designed to promote comfort with ideas. Few of my students ask me what I read; no matter, I tell them anyway---especially African American students. For many of our brothers and sisters view education primarily as preparation for a good job, rather than as a “ cotillion for ideas,” a “debutante's ball” for entry in to the “society of the intellect.” Throughout my career, books have been constant learning companions, not always believable, not always correct, but always provocative. As

one who witnessed the “ March on Washington”, heard Malcom and Martin, and visited the prison cell of Mandela, I can honestly say that two important books have accompanied that pathway. I propose them now as building blocks for your personal library.

1. Black Reconstruction in America, WEB DuBois
2. The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, Harold Cruse

So, in closing I say open up the throttle and use both your personal friends and learning companions to keep the boots of racism, sexism, and fundamentalism at bay. It will take personal cunning, but it is doable. Two volumes that give fascinating accounts of black history are Bound for Canaan (Bordewich) and Buried in Bitter Waters, (Jaspin). I am forever indebted to Jay Luvass who nurtured in me a great love for history in general, and Civil War history in particular.

In closing, please tell your friends about MIT's open learning project...<http://ocw.mit.edu> and that a computer is a learning station at home. If you missed any books on this list, send me an email ... ggholson@bellsouth.net; be sure to introduce yourselves to Madame Kim Briscoe, charming representative from the Memphis Symphony. Engage books voraciously and engage the classical arts relentlessly, to provoke thought, revise thinking, understand conflict, and stimulate your imaginations. Your lives and the lives of your children depend upon it! Ignite and hold high the flame of ideas and the arts in Memphis, and they will shine through you and yours.

ps(extra credit) ...Negritude, Leopold Senghor