

# OUR YOUTH SHOULD BE PORTRAYED MORE POSITIVELY

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

You can tell that things are going badly when Black youth does not get a chance to be terrified out of the water by either Jaws or Jaws II. In so many ways, movies are a mirror of the realities of society. Think about it for a moment. How often, during this century, have you seen a portrayal of Black youth, in which something good or positive is taking place? Seldom.

During the 1950s a number of nuclear energy and science fiction films were released. Most of them had to do with the almost total destruction of the human race. There were always a few survivors. With the exception of "The World, The Flesh and The Devil," with Harry Belafonte, all of the survivors were white. The world of the future would, by those delineations, be all white. Black people have been presented as extras not only on the screen but also in real life. Such has happened because their differences have been viewed as inferiorities.

"I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards, — ten cents a package — and exchange.

The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card — refused it preemptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with certain suddenness that I was different from the others

W.E.B. DuBois penned those lines in 1904 in his first major book: "The Souls of Black Folk." He suggested that similar revelations, sooner or later, come to every Black person. They have to get used to it because they cannot get over it. Ours is a society in which the color of a person's skin can still make him or break him. The fairer one's skin is, the fairer society is to that person. No one likes to hear such truths, but then, I am not running for office.

For over 115 years, Black people have had to endure the stigma of second class citizenship. Few political leaders have assumed the responsibility of ensuring Blacks equal protection before the law. That bit of protection which Blacks have had, have come about as a result of their constant petitioning for equity. From time to time some whites, in authority, have responded and have accepted the responsibilities of their offices. Any child can accept responsibility once it has been delegated. It takes, however, a much different kind of person to assume responsibility.

Each generation of Blacks have been told that the

"changes cannot occur overnight — that things will improve for/with the next generation." For generations they have been told that. Some have begun to believe it. Black people have been put off for years with such rhetoric and yearly the youthful yearnings of youthful yeomen are deflated like yeastless cup cakes as the yahoos in the seats of government debate the Constitutional guarantees and rights of Black people.

A year after the publication of "The Souls of Black Folk," Las Vegas was founded. Most of those who arrived here during that early spring were adults. They had great plans for the new town. They realized that the future of Las Vegas hinged on the young — their children and their children's children.

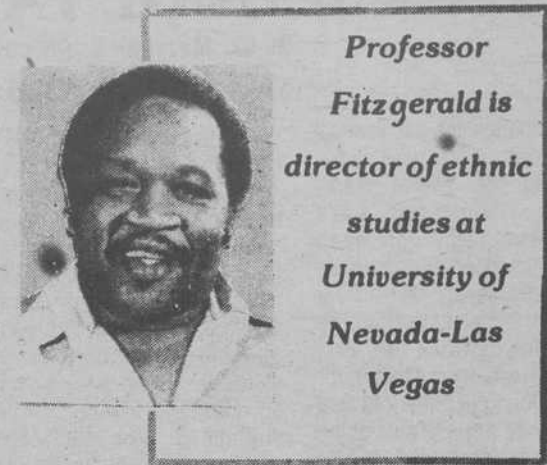
For the first half century of its existence, all children of all races attended the same schools. There was no segregation in education, only in expectations. White children were given the opportunity to run the gamut as far as ambitions were concerned. They were encouraged to be doctors, lawyers, architects, carpenters, plumbers, engineers and all of the other career choices. Such was not the case for Black children. If they thought of remaining in Las Vegas, the height of their ambitions could only be maids, porters, janitors or all around handymen. The respectful professions were closed to them.

There were few role models for them locally. All of the successful people were white. This told them, in no

uncertain terms, that they were doomed to mediocrity. Why study? Why learn to read or write or do arithmetic? The only thing waiting for them at the end of the tunnel was a broom and a mop. Some Black parents, in spite of the obstacles and lack of opportunities, did encourage their children. Apparently they hoped that the insecurities of their "neighbors" would disappear and thereby, give their children a chance. For the moment, however, their dreams would have to be deferred.

Black parents, until a quarter century ago, had to deal with those realities. What could they tell their children — those who talked of being doctors, nurses, and the rest? The truth, "They don't let Black people do those things." Today, Black people are paying the price for those lost opportunities. The tradition of being high school, college and professional school graduates is not on a par with white counterparts. Some white people yet see this reality as being the fault of Blacks. Can you believe that?

A generation ago, not too many Black youngsters were completing high school. The incomes of their families was so limited that quite often it required the efforts of all members of a family to simply help make ends meet. In the past, Black children attended school until such time that they were big enough to go to work. Those of smaller stature were lucky, they were able to remain in school longer. The



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same was true of Black girls. Their job opportunities were much more limited than those of their brothers.

During the era of segregation in Las Vegas, Black students were not permitted to participate fully, in all school activities. There were white organizations and, except for elementary schools on the westside, there were only limited extra-curricular activities open to Black students. Black girls suffered the most. They were not cheerleaders, pom pom girls, beauty queens or members of elite marching groups. At every turn, their self-concepts were diminished.

In the past, large numbers of Black students have been not only directed away from college preparatory courses but, they have been denied access to certain classes. Quite often they were told that those classes were filled, when they were not, and thereby shuttled off the meaningless "busy work" classes.

In the past, Black male students who have participated in interscholastic sports have been waltzed through the system. Their eligibility was protected so long as they had playing time. Once the season ended or they would have exhausted their eligible years, they go down the tubes. An alarming number cannot read or write and we are forced to wonder how they had managed to remain scholastically eligible.

In the secondary schools, there are programs which are designed to permit students to take classes and, at the same time, participate for credit, in the job market. Students are both encouraged and aided in participating in those "job

study" programs. Until recently, Black students were not involved in that activity. It was not of their choosing. Some counselors and employers simply refused to either recommend or accept black youngsters.

A great deal of the success of these programs hinge on local businesses. Without their support, it would be doomed to failure. I am certain that most of us have observed, in our travels around the city of Las Vegas, the large numbers of young people who are working.

Their places of employment range from fast food operations, department stores, boutiques, lot boys for automobile dealerships, runners for ad agencies and others, stock boys, grocery baggers and any number of other ventures. We have also observed either consciously or unconsciously, the almost total absence of Black youth on most of those jobs in most of the business establishments.

The depression, which America feels will occur with continuing inflationary trends, has already occurred with Blacks.

Las Vegas has not addressed this problem sufficiently. In the entertainment industry we observed the limited number of black youth employed. As new hotels open, new jobs are created but, Blacks continue to be unemployed. Something has to be done. One of our greatest natural resources, black youth, is being wasted.

It is time to cease paying lip service and get on the stick. Some are growing less willing to continue to do without. As Baretta says: "you got the ball . . ."

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