

Our View

The greatest love of all

As Valentine's Day fast approaches, married couples, star-crossed lovers, teen paramours and singles bent on wooing their romance interest will zip to the nearest mall or specialty store, flitting through items they hope will restore the fire, stoke the fire in the relationship, spark a fire, or put out one.

But as Cupid flies through the sky looking for victims to impale with his love arrows, we are given the chance to reflect on the true meaning of love and examine what we love about the people we love; the way they make us laugh, their sensitivity, their inner beauty, their spirit.

Valentine's Day is also a good time to remember your first love; that boy or girl you dreamed you would spend the rest of your life with, the one you thought about every chance you got, the one who made your heart melt at the sound of his or her voice, the one that made you fumble over your words, the one that made your heart go pitter-pat.

Cupid's special day also gives us a chance to look at how "looking at love" has shaped our lives. We can examine the relationships our parents, relatives or friends' parents had. We can learn from their mistakes, pocket their wisdom, rejoice in their happiness, sulk in their sorrow.

Valentine's Day is all about love. But what often gets lost in the hubbub of romance is the fact that before loving someone else, you must love yourself. To quote Grammy Award-winning songstress Whitney Houston, "The greatest love of all is inside of me."

That's true. When you love yourself, you can do so much more for yourself and for others. Loving yourself doesn't mean becoming narcissistic. It means recognizing what it is about you that makes you special and invaluable. Recognizing the traits that set you apart makes it easier to appreciate what makes your mate special and invaluable.

So while you're in line to get tickets to a weekend show or on the phone confirming reservations for a weekend getaway or just planning a quiet evening at home with your special someone, remember that loving yourself makes loving someone else even better.



"MAYBE WE'D BE SAFER JUST HANGING OUT ON THE STREET..."

TO BE EQUAL

Poor men want to work, raise families

By Joan Wallace-Benjamin and Ted Murphy
(Guest Columnists)

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Recent political campaigns and policy debates about welfare have largely focused on whether low-income single mothers can realistically be expected to find paid work and how this goal can be accomplished.

Unfortunately, the other side of the equation has been virtually ignored. Poor men, especially African-American and Latino men, turn up on the radar screen of politics mostly either as "predators" needing incarceration or as "deadbeat dads" shirking their responsibilities.

Despite the recent good news about the U.S. economy, young men's earnings have fallen for more than 20 years. For example, 25-to-34-year-old men with jobs experienced a 17 percent drop in real earnings between 1973 and 1995. The situation for those without college degrees is even worse. High school dropouts who worked earned only \$16,200 in 1995, a decline of nearly 40 percent since 1973. Employed high school graduates earned \$23,800, or nearly 30 percent less.

Job opportunities for young men without skills are frequently limited to low-paying service jobs, such as security and retail, that are often part-time or temporary. Not surprisingly, racial disparities remain: Black high school graduates had similar earnings (\$18,700) as white high school dropouts.

In 1995, one quarter of all civilian young men earned less than needed to raise a family of

three above the poverty line—double the 1973 rate.

Among African-American young men, half of high school graduates and three-quarters of high school dropouts had earnings less than the standard (approximately \$12,000). These figures show how difficult it would be for many young men without skills to settle into marriage and family.

Interviews we recently conducted in Boston suggest that low-income young men have extensive work histories and really want to work. Unfortunately, the lack of post-secondary education has severely limited their options for well-paying jobs. They cannot squarely face a future of low-wage jobs, meet their child-support or breadwinner obligations, and realistically believe they can achieve the American dream.

However, public policies can help out disadvantaged workers.

We must expand education and training programs for less skilled workers. Many men we interviewed wanted to obtain more education, but felt they couldn't afford it. Stipends, increased access to loans, or assistance with child-support payments would help those without college education get additional training. Community colleges and employers should collaborate to develop programs that integrate classroom education, on-the-job training, and paid work.

In order to increase the falling incomes of low-wage workers, we should expand the federal earned-income tax credit so that childless adults, or at least noncustodial parents

(usually fathers) receive a substantial earnings boost.

Alternatively, a new system of wage supplements might be considered. In addition, the minimum wage should be raised again and indexed against inflation.

Governments and nonprofit organizations should create public works or community service jobs to increase demand for low-skilled work and to act as an employer of last resort. Federal welfare-to-work funds could be used for this purpose.

Child-support policies and procedures should be rethought in light of the economic difficulties of men with fewer skills. We certainly believe that noncustodial fathers should be held financially responsible for their children. Those we interviewed told us they wanted to "do the right thing" and be good fathers. We need to help them increase their earning power and pay child support without falling into arrears.

Programs that focus on strengthening fathers' bonds with their children and offer employment and training programs are likely to be more

effective than policies that simply hunt down and jail deadbeat dads. In order to help prevent noncustodial fathers from accumulating crushing debts, we should adjust child-support payments automatically to earnings fluctuations.

The neglect, demonization, and incarceration of poor, African-American, and Latino men must be reversed.

As we think about the ecology of poverty and welfare issues, we should avoid placing a singular focus — and blame — on single mothers. Poor children have fathers, whether they live together or not. Both parents should be expected to share responsibilities for supporting and caring for their children. To make this happen, however, we must develop public policies that help men and women with fewer skills earn decent, above-poverty wages.

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