

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Priorities appear to be in the stars

Star Wars fans waiting 16 years to find out what happened to their favorite intergalactic brood of rogue-fighting avengers can exhale. But "Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace," written and directed by George Lucas — the movie opened Wednesday at 12:01 a.m. — didn't offer an ending to the mythological trilogy of the late '70s and early '80s, rather it probed the tale's beginning.

So much for closure.

What's amazing is that Americans from sea to shining sea pitched tents, camped in front of ticket outlets and movie theaters, missed work and school and stood in line for days just to get tickets. One could argue that their's is a devotion unmatched by any aficionado of space-based adventures between human — or near-human heroes in the cases of Chewbacca, RD D2 and Yoga — and other worldly cosmic pirates who often have amphibious features.

Granted, Star Wars is as much about the story as it is about fun. But it says a lot that so many Americans are so enamored with this fictitious tale that they would sleep outside for hours on end to get the choicest tickets and have fleeting bragging rights — "I saw the movie before you and if you upset me I'll spoil the plot."

Just think about what this country could be if people got so stirred about community volunteerism or outreach. Not to belittle the millions of Americans who devote time, energy and money to mentoring to youth, providing drug abuse services, volunteering at nursing homes and assisted-living centers, ministering in prisons, easing the social transition of adopted children and countless other humanitarian efforts.

Imagine if people camped outside drug houses and rallied police and elected officials to their neighborhoods to put an end to the inflow of drugs.

Ponder for a second the impact a grass-roots effort could have in pooling funds together to build a community center or a recreational facility for inner-city children and their counterparts in rural America.

Think about the improved literacy and test scores that could result from an all-out assault on education. Or about pro-bono professional counseling for troubled youth. Or monthly national "nite-out" programs to let the nefarious elements of society know honest, law-abiding citizens mean business. There are lots of ways to make a difference.

Former Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell should be lauded for his nation-building call to help "save the youth." He's produced action, in the form of backing efforts to save the National Endowment for the Arts and set aside money for recreational projects in the nation's decaying inner cities and blighted rural pockets. He's tapped businesses, encouraging them to become partners in education and recreation.

But neither Powell or any other high-profile pitchman can do it alone. The millions of Americans who already volunteer need your help. If we don't heed the call, not even Luke Skywalker can save us.



...Yet another group attempts mass suicide.

Women prisoners subjected to inhuman treatment

Special to Sentinel-Voice

There are nearly 140,000 women in U.S. jails and prisons, more than half of whom are mothers, some 200,000 children under 18 have incarcerated mothers.

Over the past five years the incarceration rate for African-American women has increased an astounding 828 percent, with most serving sentence for nonviolent offenses.

As troubling as these numbers are, what is more disturbing are the stories behind these numbers — stories of real women and real families.

In a recent report titled "Not Part of My Sentence," Amnesty International looks at the frightening increase of incarcerated women in the United States. It looks at some of the reasons for this increase and at the conditions under which these women are forced to live and what happens to them while they are locked up.

What was found speaks ill of a so-called civilized nation which honors justice and fair treatment.

One of the report's findings was that the rapid rise of women incarcerated is directly attributable to some of the draconian drug laws passed in the past decade or so.

"Without any fanfare, the 'war on drugs' has become a war on women," it reports.

For example, women are placed at a distinct disadvantage by "gender-neutral" federal sentencing

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson

guidelines which do not allow the court to consider the impact of imprisonment on single mothers or the minor role that many women play in drug possession and sale crimes as a result of abusive relationships that they are in.

One of the most shocking parts of the report focused on the sexual abuse of women prisoners. This is particularly significant when one considers that many of the women in our jails and prisons have been victims of sexual abuse before they enter prison.

Contrary to international standards, U.S. prisons employ men to guard women and place few restrictions on the duties of male staff. Seventy percent of the federal prison guards are men.

Women inmates are often targets of sexually offensive language, excessively groped during searches and watched by male staff while they shower and undress. Some are raped. Or in the words of a New York inmate, "That was not a part of my sentence, to perform oral sex with the officers."

Take the case of a Washington state inmate who gave birth in prison after years

of imprisonment. She charged that she had been raped by a guard, who did prove to be the baby's father in DNA testing, but who was never prosecuted because he claimed it was consensual sex.

Washington, like many states, has no laws criminalizing sex between inmates and guards.

Amnesty International also found that women inmates receive inadequate health care.

Gynecological examinations are not routine in some systems. There is little in the way of alcohol or substance abuse treatment and few mental health services. Women are routinely shackled to hospital beds,

even when they are in labor or are dying of cancer or other diseases.

The impact of the imprisonment of women on their families cannot be underestimated.

In 1997-98, the report found that there were 1,300 babies born in U.S. prisons. In 40 states these babies are taken from their mothers almost immediately after birth. In a few others, mothers are allowed to keep their infants from 30 days to 24 months.

In California, women eligible for a special program can keep their babies with them throughout their incarceration.

And what about older children? The incarceration of single mothers disrupts whole families.

Parents are thrown into the role of caretaker. Marriages suffer and dissolve. Children are denied visits. Some are put into the foster care system.

In one respect, women and men are treated similarly by

(See Women, Page 18)

NEVADA'S ONLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

LAS VEGAS Sentinel Voice

PUBLISHED BY GRIOT COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

Nevada's only African-American community newspaper.
Published every Thursday by Griot Communications Group, Inc.
900 East Charleston Boulevard • Las Vegas, Nevada 89104
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Fax (702) 380-8102

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and West Coast Black Publishers Association