

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Ineffective? So far, they're all we have

Anyone with a pulse, consciousness and some understanding of the Las Vegas African-American community could, and perhaps, should have seen this coming. The long, hot summer has arrived early, and it's not as if the community hadn't been warned.

In late January, fighting occurred at its annual Martin Luther King Day Parade. If it's possible to be nauseated after death, then Dr. King- the apostle of non-violence- was "driving the porcelain bus" in a bathroom in heaven after watching his people in Sin City desecrate his ideal.

Fast-forward, now, to Tuesday night, as echoes of comments made during "Safe Summer Nights"- a program of hope staged by City Councilman Lawrence Weekly and others- began to fade at the safety of families and children.

The incongruity of fighting while celebrating Dr. King, of all people, and of shooting up apartments in the wake of Safe Summer Nights, provides disturbing bookends between which we can peruse "Las Vegas' Black-on-Black Violence: 2001," and its volumes that make for such curious reading.

In February, a former gangbanger told the neophyte "Coalition for Community Peace"- and not too politely- their initiatives had better connect with the brothers (and sisters) doing the shooting. A month later, another- this one still bangin', warned that the good will, which has issued from the coalition and from groups like Bill Miller's "Our Choice," needs to take root soon, before summer arrives and "school's out" in the worst way.

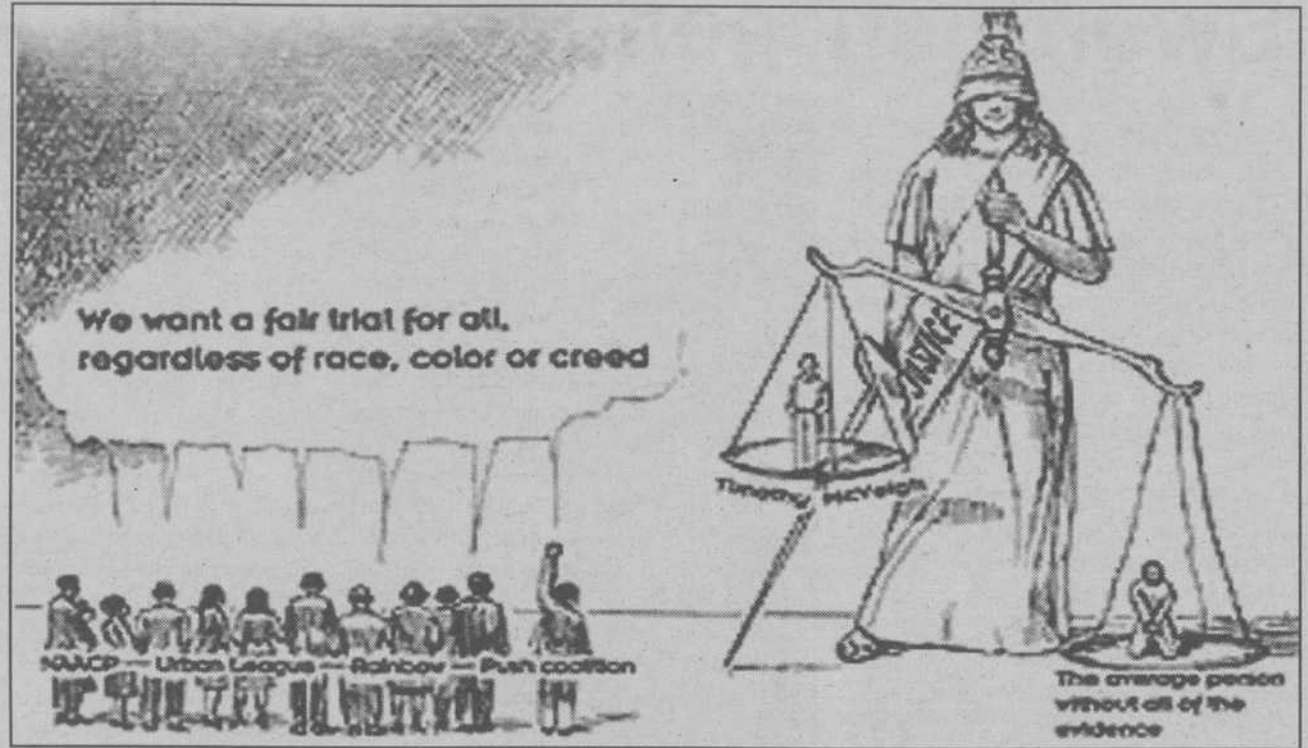
"Activists" deliver polemics over the brutalization of "the community," but the violence increases. Ron Current's Black Panthers besiege City Hall- where the silence is deafening- to improve malignant economic conditions that drive the community to feed, parasitically, upon itself, but his has been a quixotic mission. Social workers insist jobs are the solution while educators say the answer is in classrooms. The preachers posture and call for marches, but, as usual, no one takes them seriously.

"Ineffective" is the word one hears a lot these days when discussions about these and other interventions arise. On that basis they should be discarded as grand wastes of time, right?...Wrong.

A woman who works in the trenches of this battlefield where the community's future is being contested- teaching parents to prepare their pre-school children for formal education and, one hopes, a productive life beyond- takes a view that, somehow, seems useful now.

While conceding there's no magic bullet, that no one strategy will work, she believes the community must persist with what it is doing. As in the sixties, she says, no one march did it- we persisted. Our desperate efforts may not be, figuratively speaking, the most dashing beau at the ball, but as they say down South: "You dance with who brung ya."

Meanwhile, cynics who criticize efforts that seem to bear no fruit waste energy others might use to get better results. Those lamenting a perceived dearth of intelligent and courageous leadership might consider whether enough followers are truly committed to revolution and renaissance, and should note well: "When the people are ready, the master will appear."



Blueprint for effective school reform

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The latest edition of the nation's report card released last month paints a dismal picture of how black youngsters are doing in school. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, nearly two out of every three black children in the fourth grade read below the basic level.

That means they can state a simple fact about a story they read, but can't analyze it. Those pitiable skills, if one may use that word here, won't get them very far in the 21st century economy.

That sort of poor performance is disgraceful, and unacceptable.


My harsh words aren't directed toward the children. Children want to do well. When large numbers of them fail, it's because adults — school administrators, teachers, parents, and their larger community — have failed them.

We know it doesn't have to be this way. Poorly performing public schools can be turned around if the adults around the children mobilize to do so; if adults say: no more excuses for school failure.

This is not to glibly dismiss the problems that many poorly performing public schools, which are often located in impoverished communities and neighborhoods, must wrestle with. In fact, my point is just the opposite. It is to say that the impact of "outside" problems of poverty on school pupils' scholastic performance can be overcome if a community mobilizes to save the chil-

To Be Equal

By *Hugh B. Price*
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dren. That's not the rhetoric of a Pollyanna. It's based on hard facts — in the current case, the standardized test results in reading for fourth graders in the Mount Vernon, N.Y. public schools.

In recent decades, the public schools languished in Mount Vernon, a Westchester County suburb of New York City, whose school district is predominately black and where 60 percent of the school pupils are poor. The evidence was seen in the students at an early age.

Three years ago, just one-third of the fourth-graders there met the state fourth-grade reading standards.

Two years ago, the Mount Vernon community set out to turn things around. First, citizens elected a new school board. Then, the school board fired the old superintendent — who had been there 25 years — and brought in Ronald O. Ross, a former teacher and principal in the New York City, and Hempstead, Long Island schools. Third, Supt. Ross, with the help of an energized school staff and a mobilized community, started to set things right by declaring that he would not accept excuses for minority and poor chil-

dren not doing well academically.

This year the fruits of that community-wide policy stunned educators across the state.

This year the results of the state fourth-grade reading tests showed: that Mount Vernon schools included three of the state's most improved schools; that several Mount Vernon schools had more than doubled the percentage of students passing the test since 1999; that in one school the percentage of students exceeding state standards soared from 21 percent to 60 percent, and topped 90 percent in two other schools; and that system-wide, the percentage of pupils exceeding state standards — remember, only 33 percent three

years ago — is now 77 percent.

What has happened in Mount Vernon shows the power of high standards at work. Supt. Ross said he would not accept failure, and the school district backed him by doubling its investment in professional development for teachers, hiring curriculum specialists to help principals and teachers plan a coordinated effort to improved pupil performance, and adjusting teachers' schedules so that they'd have the time to plan effectively.

And they increased the standards for writing and reading in each of the early grades, and made sure students got the proper instruction and the necessary help to do well. For example, all fourth graders are now expected to write a convincing essay and be able to understand the main point of a story.

Parents are directly involved, too. After the first grade, all students are expected to write a journal each night, and they carry home with them forms that an adult must sign confirming that
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