

3-2011

## VOICES Newsletter, v7n4, March 2011

University of Northern Iowa. Center for Multicultural Education.

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### Recommended Citation

University of Northern Iowa. Center for Multicultural Education., "VOICES Newsletter, v7n4, March 2011" (2011). *Voices Newsletter*. 8.

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VOLUME 7

ISSUE 4

MARCH 2011

# Voices

Promoting diversity in the University community and beyond...

## The CME Celebrates 40th Anniversary!

by C. R.

On February 21, 2011, we celebrated the CME's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with food and music: arguably, the two most important entities that bring people together regardless of race. The purpose of the event was to illustrate how far the CME has come in spreading the message and importance of diversity across a predominantly white institution. Guests were able to socialize and enjoy archived pictures and newspaper articles from the 1970's.

As I was preparing for the event, I realized that UNI was not a very friendly place for racial and ethnic minorities in the '70s. Primarily black students battled with the administration for a place they could call their own. Through their persistence and organization, black students were successful in securing a location where they could feel welcome and comfortable. Reading through the history, I was able to empathize with

those students and apprehend that it was not an easy process; it consisted of many negotiations and sit-ins that allowed them to set a precedent at UNI. I can acknowledge that because of those strong black students we are now able to celebrate history in a center for multicultural students.

I wish more students had attended the celebration, because the CME is a place for students, by students. Seeing the few students celebrate this historical event made me aware that we need to do a lot more to represent students of diverse backgrounds.

I realized not many students are utilizing the resources offered at the CME, and this reality bothers me. In the future, I would encourage students to be a part of history and celebrate the movements that have established diversity on a predominantly white campus.



*New facility attached to Maucker Union after the 2003 edition*



*The Ethnic Minorities Cultural Education Center was at one time housed on College Street, which is now the UNI Honors Cottage*



*Original House which was first utilized by the UNI Vice-President before becoming the EMCEC*

# Public Intellectual Par Excellence

by Malcolm Thomas



*"Dyson did not hold his tongue and dived into a critical analysis of many public figures including Bill Cosby, Colin Powell, Ronald Regan, George W. Bush, and the most controversial individual for the audience, namely president Barack Obama."*

A major highlight of this semester for UNI and the CME was the visit of the distinguished scholar and public intellectual, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, who is also a minister, author, radio host, and professor at Georgetown University. He received his Bachelor's from Carson-Newman College, and his Master's and Doctorate in religion from Princeton. The event, which was free to the public, and sponsored by the CME, took place Thursday, February 17, 2011, at the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center. Roughly 400 were in attendance. Because I am a fan of Dr. Dyson's work, I looked forward to his speech and could feel the excitement and anticipation from the audience.



Dr. Dyson grew up in the ghetto of Detroit, Michigan, and is known for his fast-talking style that he amazingly blends with rhymes, impressive vocabulary, and animated oratory skills. Dyson did not disappoint and followed in this pattern during his time in Cedar Falls. He began his speech acknowledging the need for reflection and

memory of the Black experience in America, no matter how painful or uncomfortable it may be for some to discuss. Dyson did not hold his tongue and dived into a critical analysis of many public figures including Bill Cosby, Colin Powell, Ronald Regan, George W. Bush, and the most controversial individual for the audience, namely the president, Barack Obama. I personally share and enjoyed his viewpoints on Obama, for whom Dr. Dyson campaigned in 2008. He eloquently explained how President Obama has lost sight of an agenda for Blacks, the poor, and those who have suffered the largest brunt of the recession. This topic brought powerful feedback, some critical, from the audience.

I felt a strong admiration for Dyson's brutal honesty and willingness to embrace unpopular or embarrassing topics. There were several moments when I would say "I can't believe he said that." At the same time while watching Dyson speak, I began to have an even deeper appreciation for social critics and those who are willing to stand up and be a voice for the underprivileged and disadvantaged.

There were plenty of comical moments as well, with Dyson showing his connection to the younger generation by re-

citing various popular hip hop verses, noting and breaking down the intelligence and brilliance of various rap lyrics. Dyson spit out rhymes from Notorious B.I.G., Tupac, and Snoop Dogg, and then showed the correlation to the struggle of Blacks today. As a fan of rap and hip hop I really appreciated how he explained that hip hop as a whole is not vain and there are critical messages being explained that older generations should take heed and have experienced themselves. Mixed in with this Dyson serenaded the crowd with classic jazz and R&B songs.

Before leaving, Dyson took time to answer questions from the audience, continuing the debate on some topics, discussing world events, and concluded by signing and taking pictures with every single individual who stood in line to meet him. Having intellectual speakers of this magnitude at the University of Northern Iowa is very inspiring. I left that night valuing and appreciating Dyson's thoughts, and raising expectations for myself. When we witness an injustice, or a group of people that are taken advantage of, will we continue on in our personal routine or comfort level? Or will one or some of us stand up and speak out just like the Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson?

# The Meaning of RACISM



by *The Lady in the Red Scarf*

The word "racism" is not an easy topic to discuss. Many people become very uncomfortable when talking about such a taboo topic. It is not any easier when a group of individuals comprised of whites and minorities are in the same space. I comprehend that the only way to understand and empathize with people who are in oppressed situations is to become uncomfortable. The schism between whites and minorities needs to end and the way to do that is by educating ourselves on sensitive topics like racism.

Growing up, I always heard my father use racial epithets and I did not know what they meant. I asked my mother what those words meant and she said, "They are bad words and you are never to repeat them again especially in the company of those particular individuals." This was the only message I had ever received on racism. As I got older, I learned my father was a bigot and in no way did I want to be like him. I would always encourage myself to talk to people of different backgrounds just to make sure I was not like my father.

This past week, I had the opportunity to attend the

Undoing Racism Workshop in the Center for Multicultural Education at UNI and it was a valuable experience. The rationale of the workshop was to inform us of how racism began and how it got to where it is in today's society. The participants consisted of White, Black, Latino, and Bosnian individuals who were students, faculty, or community members. Whites made up the majority of the workshop. The topic of racism is an issue that cannot be discussed with a planned-out agenda. In order really to understand racism, participants had to be very honest, i.e., to let everyone see who they really are.

This workshop allowed me to put aspects of my earlier life in order. I learned that racism is not a majority population wishing hate on people of color. Due to the destruction of our society in the U.S. some white people have power and in the process of heading up institutions they use their powers to keep minorities oppressed. Racism was created back in 1680 and still exists today through institutions like the Department of Human Services, the Media, and the Education system. Institutions like those keep individuals from ghettos, barrios, and trailer parks oppressed from lack of building strong relationships. The workshop not only informed me about institutionalized

racism, but also made me aware of its difference from individualized racism. Individualized racism is not what keeps minorities from getting ahead; institutions that have been created mainly by whites do. If we do not organize and build healthy relationships, we will never be able to change institutionalized racism. Without organizations and healthy relationships, whites will continue to force power on people of color—willingly or unwillingly—and keep us marginalized.

When the workshop was over, after two-and-a-half days, I felt more educated on racism than I had in my entire life. Various preconceived notions that I had about many white individuals surfaced to be true. However, I also realized there are many white people who feel ashamed and hurt by the mistreatment of minorities and want to make a difference. This experience was one I would do all over again. I plan to organize with other individuals to make a change in institutionalized racism. I will become more aware of issues on racism and speak up when I see injustice. I recommend staff, faculty, students, and community members to participate in this workshop if they have not done so yet. Being able to educate ourselves will make racism a less taboo and practiced issue.



# Thoughts from the Director:

## ARE YOU READY TO RUMBLE?

by Dr. Michael D. Blackwell

*“...they were almost running with their fists up in the air, all in unison and shouting for change!”*



<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/62537>

Here we are, over two decades later, and we can find similar pictures in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Libya and elsewhere. The spirit of reform, transformation, and democratization is very strong now in the world, but it seems to have escaped contagion in the United States.

Some might argue that the Tea Party movement most resembles the fire of the

rebels in the aforementioned country. But I would argue that that organization is not forging a revolution, but reverting back to some imaginary halcyon day, best represented by the Reagan era.

Those days were not good for the middle class, labor, the poor, homosexuals, women, and last but not least, African-American males. They are still feeling the sting of “Reaganomics”; however, because of walls of division into which they have been socialized, they cannot come together to mount a protest against their collective oppression. As long as they focus on themselves and do not strongly consider the good of the whole, they will be complacent with very small gains that, as we learned during the 80’s, do not trickle down.

What we can learn from the masses of people in Tahrir Square in Egypt and other places where protestors are gathered, is that a diversity of people and perspectives can unite for a common cause. Ideas and organizational goals do not have to be compromised or lose their integrity when joining up with those who are individually seeking freedom, justice, and human dignity.

I’m sure the individual organizations still gather among their members rou-

tinely. Doing so does not mean that they are sequestering, isolating, or segregating themselves; they are simply having a meeting.

There is no harm in a group, having a particular identity, gathering together to plan, strategize, and other promote their mission. It is erroneous to make the claim that they are merely being exclusive and discriminating against those who do not fit into their identity group. People who make that claim need to take a chill pill, so to speak, for there is no reason to believe that such organizational members are unable, when necessary, to suspend their singularity of purpose for the greater good.

The same applies to student organizations. They can meet as usual with like-minded individuals, for lack of a better way to say it, while seeking to collaborate with other student groups, for a common cause. I encourage this two-pronged approach.



# THE LEGACY OF JIM CROW

by Dr. Michael D. Blackwell

The building of prisons has become a lucrative business, and the only way for it to be maintained is if we choose to fill them with people. Consequently, since the crime rate has been reduced over the past few years, we have to discover new types of crime in order to lock people away for enough time to overcrowd the penitentiaries. But these spanking new facilities do not shroud the fact that we are looking pretty ugly in the human rights arena. The richest country in the world, the only superpower left and the model, after which fledgling new democracies seek to emulate, cannot seem to get its act together when it comes to dealing with criminals. Locking people up is the inhumane solution to a whole host of reasons why people commit crimes; and the responsibility for miscreant behaviors does not rest solely with the perpetrators.

In this regard, the ones who most are victimized by this mentality are African American males and the communities in which they live. We have been complacent in this country about incarcerating these men, because they have been so dehu-

manized by racist individuals and institutions that we are immune to the multiple and cumulative effects it has on black communities and the society at large. We are ruining entire neighborhoods because of the lack of black men in them who could be fathers, husbands, workers, voters, and so forth. It is amazing how devastating this dehumanization has been, yet countless numbers of people are impervious to it!

In comes professor and attorney Michelle Alexander. She has written a book that demonstrates the cruel hands and iron feet that have insensitively helped to destroy the gains made by the classic Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s: *The New Jim Crow: Massive Incarceration in the Age of Obama*. In many legal ways, the criminal justice system perpetrates and perpetuates the demonization of black men to the extent that it mirrors and sometimes exacerbates the Jim Crow era, which fundamentally began after the Civil War and the decline of the Reconstruction period. "Separate and unequal" was the true legacy of the 1896 U.S. Su-

preme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, until it was struck down by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Alexander shows the methodical and deliberate effort to continue to lock black men from the doors of opportunity and success and to fortify a system, as Dr. Manning Marable would say, of massive unemployment, massive incarceration, and massive disenfranchisement.

There have been book discussions of *The New Jim Crow* taking place over the past few weeks both on and off campus. These gatherings will culminate in the visit of Alexander to the University of Northern Iowa on March 30. During the book discussions, many people expressed ignorance of a lot of the facts detailed in her book. They will now be able to speak directly with her about what she wrote and what she presents in her address here on campus. How wonderful it is to have the author with us!

## Reflections on Michael Eric Dyson

by C. R.

It was a great privilege having been offered the opportunity to hear Michael Eric Dyson speak. I had seen him on television a couple of times in the past, and he always caught my attention by the way he spoke. Even though Dr. Dyson has an educated background, he still relates to his audience by being himself. Hearing him speak in person was of great magnitude and a mind-altering experience. Hearing the history about slavery as well as views on Obama and hip hop made the event a lot more intriguing for me. Dr. Dyson inter-

weaved lyrics from Biggie, Tupac, and 50 Cent eloquently to present his point of views on certain issues. He also enlightened the older generation, by incorporating R& B hits tolerate to that demographic. As I saw Dr. Dyson adapt to many genres of individuals in the audience that night, it created a sense of belonging and appreciation.

Existing in a predominantly white institution, being Hispanic, and from a rough neighborhood, I have always felt different. I speak and act differently than most students. Many



students look at me like I should not be in college, because I do not articulate every word that comes out of my mouth, like many of them do. After witnessing a well-known author with a Ph.D. speak the same way I do, I felt confident and unashamed. I have always been proud to be me, but now I am not going to apologize for who I am. Whether I articulate every word or not I will still attain success. Thanks to Dr. Dyson, I will now hold my head up high and let it be known that I am here to stay.



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*We are also on Facebook and Twitter!*

### **Our Mission**

We foster success in racial and ethnic minority students, contribute to the cultural competence of all students, and promote an appreciation of diversity in the University Community.

# **Come Over Here!**

## *A play performance sponsored by the CME*

During the month of April, the Center for Multicultural Education will be producing a play entitled: *Come Over Here: A Look at Female/Male Relationships in the Collegiate Setting*. Written and directed by Dr. Blackwell, director for Multicultural Education at UNI, this play will consist of 6 major roles, 3 male and 3 females with some additional non-speaking supporting roles available.

The three scenes of this one-act play will be a catalyst for discussion, being performed before an live audience, who will then spawn into discussion about topics highlighted within the performance included sexual violence, gossiping, homophobia and

gender roles within relationships across cultures. This is a great opportunity for students to get involved with the CME and start a significant dialogue and discussion surrounding the positives and challenges of dating during the college years.

Auditions will take place on Tuesday, March 29 from 3:30 – 7:00 p.m. at the Center for Multicultural Education. Students will be notified by the end of the week regarding roles within the play. Students interested in participating must be willing to commit to three joint rehearsals before the performance on Tuesday, April 12, at 7:30 p.m.

**If interested in participating, contact the Center for Multicultural Education at 319-273-2250 or by email at [cme@uni.edu](mailto:cme@uni.edu).**

