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Mark Barney

Social Justice Autobiography

I was born in Stockton, California, and raised in a working, poor community of Blacks, whites, Mexicans and Filipinos. My stepfather was an ordained minister employed by the State of California as a custodian. My mother was a homemaker and the strongest, most impressive woman I've ever known.

In 1972, we moved to an inner city community in Sacramento that happened to be the most prosperous Black community in the city. The community boasted a Black-owned newspaper, a taxi cab service, restaurants, nightclubs, car lots, and many other Black-owned and operated businesses. There was also a cadre of Black and revolutionary nationalists that would post literature on boarded up storefronts to raise awareness about George Jackson, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale and others who were being held by the State of California's so called Department of Corrections. This was the environment where I spent my formative years. I was a twelve-year-old thief in training (self-taught) and I loved the opportunities that the city presented.

My first prison stint was in 1982. Inside of the prison walls I encountered Black men striving to deconstruct the miseducation that young Black men had been exposed to in our schools and to educate us in ways that would serve as a vehicle for liberation. Accepting responsibility, holding oneself accountable and looking out for the welfare of the next brother were lessons that were preached daily. Cleanliness in speech and body, situational awareness, self-discipline in study and physical fitness were expected of "conscious brothers." These practices were modeled by the Muslims, Panthers and Nationalist Brothers who were our teachers and guides.

In the California Department of Corrections (CDC) you grow up quickly. A failure to recognize the conniving, treacherous men among you may cost you your life. I see similarities with brothers in our community today. The time has come for the Black men in our communities to have an honest conversation about the pain and suffering that our own conduct is producing. Before confronting institutionalized racism that obviously exists, we may want to address issues within our immediate control. Specifically, the actions of a small minority that insist on destroying themselves and others and the inaction of those among us who have yet to challenge those behaviors (I begin with myself). How can we expect social justice from others when Black men are being unjust to their own family members? While women and children are not safe in their own homes, how can we expect others to provide social justice? We must set limits and decide how far we are willing to go to provide our own with a sense of justice so that those within the community have a sense of security and hope. Will the men in our community sit idly by as women are abused and raped by other Black men or while underage girls are lured or forced into the sex industry? Black “boys” masquerading as men are killing Black children as they involve themselves in childish behavior under the guise of “gangsterism.”

One prominent Islamic leader proposed that Black people should pool their resources and buy land to set aside for graveyards within the Black community. He then suggested we proceed through the community and remove those men that insist on living a life of destruction. That may be extreme, but it highlights the need for men in the community to provide a sense of hope for their own people. For those outside of our community, it shows that we are going to be proactive when it comes to seeking justice. I end this with a poem by brother Albert Nuh Washington. A brother that sacrificed his life for the liberation of his people.

Black

is a political condition
a state of oppression and consciousness
a nation seeking to become

a people who hope

Liberation
is freedom from oppression
freedom to define, to determine one's destiny
free from despair

a slave to hope

Army
is a political armed unit
to defend and preserve
after it achieves

Liberation for those who hope

GENRE: Social Justice Autobiography

TAGS: Racial consciousness; Black Panthers; Nation of Islam; Race; Personal responsibility; George Jackson; Angela Davis; California Department of Corrections; Social Justice; Political consciousness