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Pull-Up A Chair

HIGHLIGHTING BLACK EXCELLENCE
VOL. 1

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A Troubled Time

From 1955 to 1965 there was a war right in the middle of America. No, it wasn't a war like World War II or the Revolutionary War. It was a war for the heart and soul of this country to determine once and for all if America was really going to be a land of equal opportunity for all. It is a war that eventually took on the name of "The Civil Rights Movement."

We must make no mistake, this was not just a shouting match. Some of the events that we even remember today became quite brutal and deadly. Those who fought in this war on both sides were deadly serious about the causes they represented and willing to fight and even die to see their cause succeed. The war waged for years and steady progress was made but not without tremendous sacrifice by the leaders of the movement who were committed to a giving a new meaning to the phrase "set my people free."

In all of black history, there may be no more significant a time since the Civil War when the rights of African Americans were so deeply fought and won. The tensions in the country had been building. When the Supreme Court mandated desegregation in the schools in the historic case Brown versus the Board of Education, the stage was set. But it was on December 1, 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama to a white man that the movement finally took shape and became a titanic struggle for the rights of African Americans in America. That first battle brought to the front line one of the most important figures to fight for Civil Rights of that era, the Reverend Martin Luther King.

This tremendous struggle for freedom was never easy and was often marked with violence. Over the next ten years some of the most important milestone in black history took place including...

- * 1957 – President Eisenhower had to send federal troops to Arkansas to secure admission to Central High School by nine black students.
- * 1960 – The sit-in at Woolworths lunch counter in Greensboro North Carolina set the stage for nonviolent protest that was used with great success for the rest of the struggle. Nonviolent protest and civil disobedience became a staple of the civil rights movement because of the influence of Martin Luther King.
- * 1963 – The historic March on Washington in which over 200,000 people gathered to hear Dr. Kings famous "I Have a Dream" speech.
- * 1964 – President Lyndon Johnson signed the bill that was the most significant event of his presidency and one he believed deeply in, the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- * 1965 – The assassination of Malcolm X and the Watts race riots.

- * 1965 – President Johnson takes another bold step to accelerate the civil rights movement implementing Affirmative Action when he issues Executive Order 11246.

This short list is just a few of the highlights of this troubled time in which the rights of all citizens of American, black and white and of all colors were being redefined both on the streets, in the courts and in the different branches of government. In the years to come there would be great steps forward. One by one, every area of American life would see breakthroughs by African Americans in the areas of sports, entertainment, education and politics. There were many proud moments and there were moments of tremendous shame and heinous acts committed by both white and black people. But through all that struggle, the society continued to grow and adapt to the will of the people as has always been the tradition in American culture.

The struggle is far from over. Discrimination and hate speech continue to be a problem to this day. And while it is easy to reflect on those days of struggle with regret, we can also look at them with pride. We can be proud of the great leaders who demonstrated tremendous courage and wisdom to lead this nation to a better way of life. And we can be proud of America because it is here where such a struggle can result in equality and freedom for all citizens, not just a few.

Black Power

In the history of African Americans in this country, there have been some tremendous movements and images that seem to capture the mood of the country and the black community at that time. And this one phrase “black power” is without a doubt one of the most simple and elegant statements of pride and unity in the black community. But it was also a phrase that came to represent the more violent and objectionable side of the struggle for equality in the black community. And that makes it a controversial phrase then and now.

Probably the greatest image of black power is the strong hand of a black man, clenched in a black glove and raised in the air in defiance and pride. Never has that salute been used so perfectly as it was at the 1968 Olympics when Tommy Smith and John Carlos raised the black power fist complete with black glove as they received their medals for their performances at those Olympic Games.

The phrase “black power” was not coined in a march or riot as might be implied. It was actually created by Robert Williams, the head of the NAACP in the early sixties. But it really started becoming a “street term” when it was adopted by Makasa Dada and Stokely Carmichael, founders of The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee which was the precursor to the famous Black Panther Party.

Sadly the black power movement became characterized by radical elements that went much further than seeking the goals of Martin Luther King and the rest of the civil rights movement’s leadership. These radical elements sought black separation and social change by violent means. And so in a time when there was tremendous turmoil in the country because of the violence in Vietnam and on the streets of America because of that social strife, The Black Panthers and other fringe groups sowed fear and hatred in response to racism which at times made it more difficult to achieve long lasting change.

But there is good to be seen even in some of the darker elements of black history and the leadership who looked to find the best way forward for African Americans. Sometimes it is necessary for the radical elements to make themselves known so reasonable members of a community can know the outer limits and find compromise. This was a value to the black power movement because it did charge the discussion, albeit with violence and made the importance of reasonable Americans to come together to seek peaceful change all the more important.

But there is another good that came from the black power movement. Those images of the raised fist were images of a pride and a willingness to stand up for the rights of black Americans. They inspired a generation of young people to become more politically active, to stand up in their own world and make that statement made famous by James Brown "Say it Loud. I'm Black and I'm Proud." That pride is an important thing and for young people to find. They have to find it in their communities and in their heroes. So if black youth took pride and courage to face their own circumstances from the bold stance of leaders who, albeit radically, said loud that black America was now going to be a force to be reckoned with, the resultant call to action to the black community produced many more positive effects than negative ones. The fringe voice does speak what is in people's hearts and by getting that anger and frustration out, it became part of the movement. That energy could be captured and used for good instead of evil. And the end result was a movement that was energized for change and to make life better for all of black America. And that was what everybody wanted.



Brown Versus The Board Of Education

In 1951, thirteen families in the small community of Topeka, Kansas got together to do something about an unjust situation. The board of education of their community was allowing racial segregation in the school system based on an out of date 1879 law. The leader of this group of concerned parents was Oliver J. Brown and the outcome of what started out as a few parents trying to make life better for their children became one of the most infamous and influential supreme court cases in history known as Brown versus the Board of Education.

The practice of school segregation had become a common and accepted practice in American society despite many movements in the history of civil rights to stop the separation of black society from white. The justification that segregation provided a "separate but equal" setting which benefited education, the truth was it was a thinly veiled attempt to deprive African American children of the quality of education that all people need to excel in the modern world.

The case continued to gather momentum until it came before the Supreme Court in May of 1954. The decision was stunning and decisive when it came back 9-0. The statement of the court was brief, eloquent and to the point stating that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Now even such a definitive statement from the Supreme Court did not end the struggle between segregationists and those who would end the practice that deprived African American children of quality education. In 1957 the Arkansas governor tried to block the integration of schools in his state and the only thing that could stop him was the intervention of federal troops sent by President Eisenhower. A similar but much more well publicized event occurred in Alabama where Governor George Wallace physically blocked black students from entering the University of Alabama. It took the intervention of federal marshals to physically remove him to assure that the law of the land, as mandated by The Supreme Court, was carried out. And the law of the land then and forever since then was that segregation was illegal in this country.

Since this landmark decision, there have been other more crafty attempts to resurrect segregation. But over the decades, attitudes have shifted to where such views on how our social institutions are set up are considered old fashioned and uneducated.

The integration of the schools was an important step in the ongoing struggle to create a truly equal society and to improve the chances of black children to grow up with the same opportunities as all other children in this country. As more and more African American children became well educated, the black population has been able to make a strong contribution to the culture and to the advancement of knowledge in every discipline of learning. Further, the growing educated black population brought about the black middle class which equalized society from an economic point of view. As African Americans began to participate in all of the economic opportunities that middle class prosperity afforded them, the chances for whites, blacks and people of all races and cultures to mix has been healthy to heal the scars of racism and slowly erase divisions in the culture.