

President H. Patrick Swygert
NASAP 50th Anniversary Conference
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The Conference Chair - Mr. William "Bill" Keene

NASAP's President- Dr. Jason D. Desousa

President-elect - Dr. Roosevelt Littleton

Other members of the executive

Students

Ladies and Gentlemen

Welcome to Howard University and Happy Black History Month to all of you.

It is a great pleasure to have all of you here today and more so because we are in the midst of Black History Month and everything that it means. Certainly, it is a time to pause and reflect on the legacy left us by our ancestors as well as to contemplate that which we hope to pass on to the next generation.

Beyond that, Black History Month 2004 is especially significant for all of us since we are celebrating two very special anniversaries this year, both of which speak to the struggles and successes of the African-American community.

First, this year marks the 50th anniversary of this organization, the National Association of Students Affairs Professionals (NASAP). As you all know, NASAP was founded here at Howard in 1954 to serve as a professional agency to promote research, development and implementation of effective and efficient student services and programs.

Fifty years later, you can take pride in the fact that NASAP has not only survived the test of time but it has expanded unto college campuses all across America. This speaks volumes to its value as an organization and how great a need was filled by its creation.

Since its inception, NASAP has sustained itself and continues to enhance its service to its members, member institutions, and the students in their charge. Further, its officers and members are respected for their expertise and

are among the higher education professionals who have served at the highest levels including presidencies at Johnson C. Smith University, Bennett College, West Virginia State College and Grambling State University, among others.

As the founding site of this organization and as a research-oriented university, Howard is especially proud of the NASAP Journal and its role as a medium for original research data in the area of student affairs practices. The spring 2003 Issue, which examined the roles and contributions of African Americans in the profession, was particularly revealing and instructive.

The NASAP Student Leadership Institute, meanwhile, attests to the centrality of excellent students' services to the philosophy and the ongoing development of the organization.

Please accept my heartiest congratulations on five decades of excellent work on behalf of our students, and my very best wishes for much richer successes in the years ahead.

The second milestone, of course, is much broader in scope and more universal in its impact—that is the anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling on Brown v. Topeka Board of Education. It was on May 17, 1954, that the Court handed down that landmark ruling aimed at dismantling segregation in the American public education system.

The coincidence of these two anniversaries affords us a unique opportunity to assess where we are in regard to how well we dispose of our responsibilities to serve and to lead.

This is true regardless of whether you are affiliated with a Historically Black College/University or a part of mainstream institution since the Brown decision impacted all of us in

different ways with its promise of a more inclusive society and equality of opportunities for all children regardless of race.

Permit me to reflect for a moment on the anniversary of Brown first of all, and secondly, to attempt to put in context the responsibility of all of us in helping us to realize the letter and the spirit of the Supreme Court ruling.

First, I would like to acknowledge the genuine and obvious progress that our community has made in the last half century. Critical measures of such progress are the opportunities available to African-Americans in education, entertainment, business, politics, and nearly every sphere of endeavor. Many of these opportunities were not open to people of my generation. Indeed, I was born in segregated America and I can recall with great clarity the day of the momentous decision and the sense of jubilation within the

black community things were about to change for the better and they did—eventually.

Today, for example, there are no longer laws in this country barring African-Americans or any other human beings from legitimate pursuits supporting their right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. On the contrary, anti-discrimination legislations are in place to ensure that automatic ceilings are not placed on the dreams of African Americans because of the color of their skin, and there are many civil liberties groups who stand ready to launch all out assaults on any such infringement on the individuals' right. This is a far cry from the society prior to Brown when separate but equal was sanctioned by the court; When black kids were not allowed in the same schools as whites; were not allowed to use the same water cooler or play in the same sandbox. When the society was starkly divided into black and white, inferior and superior.

Second, as we reflect on the successes of Brown, institutions like Howard and all of our HBCUs can be proud of the role that they played in guiding our country away from its barbaric treatment of people of color, toward a more inclusive society.

At the forefront of that struggle was a core of professors and students from the Howard University School of Law (HUSL) as well as others from the School of Education and the School of Arts and Sciences. And of course there were others like the great man himself, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Morehouse graduate.

Dr. King, I believe will forever be the face of the struggle for civil liberties in this country and rightly so. His passion and his commitment knew no bounds; nor did his dignity and his vision for a better country for all of us. He was a man among

men—strong, diligent, sincere, and indefatigable in his quest for justice.

I salute his memory and that of all the others who devoted their lives to the cause of right.

Very importantly though, Brown at 50 is an opportune time to reflect on the challenges of change and how far we still have to go despite the successes that we have had at various levels. If one listens to mainstream America one would be tempted to believe that now all is well—that there are no longer any barriers to black achievement and that it is all about individuals and what they are prepared to do for themselves.

In fact, even within the black community there is a level of complacency on such matters of social justice and the availability of educational opportunities. Many of us,

unfortunately, have bought into a superficial view of success that is largely centered on media stereotypes of black entertainers and athletes who have fast-tracked it to the top and parade their lavish lifestyles for all of us to see—and envy.

Sadly, if we see these displays of material wealth as the benchmarks of success, then the wool has been pulled over our eyes as well because the truth is that America's civil rights agenda remains largely unfinished. The promise of Brown remains largely unfulfilled and increasingly, the successes that have been gained are being eroded in many ways.

If we use education as a benchmark for example, we will see that there are huge problems for African-Americans in this area. And, it is critical that education be used as the benchmark not only because it was the specific focus of the

Brown case but because it is the traditional route to success, and it is the safest and the most guaranteed relative to all other activities.

Instead of glowing success in this area though, there is conclusive data to show that the achievement gap between black and white American students remains wide and glaring. Research shows, for example, that today's African-American seniors perform at the academic equivalent of white eight grade students. We know also that black students are more likely than their white counterparts to be labeled "learning disabled" and black students are also less likely to graduate from high school than their white peers (54 versus 78 percent nationally).

A July 2001 report by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project revealed that school segregation, not desegregation, has intensified nationwide and this was particularly glaring

during the 1990's. Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Project, noted that some 70 per cent of U.S. black students now attend schools where the minority enrollment is over 50 percent, and more than one third of black students attend a school where the minority enrollment is between 90 and 100 percent. White students on average attend schools where more than 80 percent of the enrollment is white and less than 20 per cent are from all other racial and ethnic groups combined.

This, of course, is partly due to the fact that the black population in the United States remain highly concentrated geographically—a function of slavery and Jim Crow-- and that "white flight" from some cities have left many schools with a diminishing tax base and higher concentration of immigrants and minority families.

This pattern is increasingly pervasive and, by its very nature, is self-perpetuating unless there are major adjustments in the economic and social policies at the state and federal levels. This is why for example, it is critical that the government of Maryland see the necessity of funding the Thornton Commission plan in its entirety. Otherwise, it will be the predominantly African-American children of Prince Georges County who will be disproportionately affected.

At the tertiary level, there are all kinds of issues affecting African-American students, not the least among them the growing cost of a college education. While some of our children have the wherewithal to pay their own way, the vast majority of them do not. It is incumbent on us as student leaders and professionals to find creative ways to motivate them and to help in their quest to better themselves.

The imbalance in the female-to male ratio and the attrition rate among African-American male college students, even at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is a cause for grave concern. This is an area where a group like NASAP can make a contribution in terms of our understanding of this problem as well as devising ways to ensure that within our community all of the students needs are being met.

It is imperative that we go beyond the physical and academic needs of our students to the psycho-social, emotional and spiritual the fulfillment of which will create a greater sense of balance and purpose among young people who are often seriously challenged in these areas.

The plight of black males is not only worrying because they are not enrolling, or not completing if they do enroll. It is worrying because the alternative is often much worse:

They are on the streets engaging in all kinds of illegal activities dogged by violence as a consequence. Black males run an inordinately high risk of being either a victim or a perpetrator of a violent crime.

An urban-African American male, for example who live in places like the District of Columbia, Chicago, or Brooklyn, face an extraordinarily high risk of dying from homicide. In fact, a 15-year-old urban African-American male faces a probability of being murdered before reaching his 45th birthday that ranges from almost 8.5 percent in the District of to just under 2.0 percent in Brooklyn, New York. By comparison, the probability of being murdered by age 45 is 2.21 percent nationally for all U.S. black males and 0.29 percent for all white males.

This continuing disequilibrium and inequity in the lives of African-Americans compared to their white counterparts was

not the expectation of those who celebrated the Supreme Court ruling in 1954.

The challenge therefore is for us to understand why so many of our students are failing at so many levels of the system. In as much as we celebrate the achievements of those who succeed, we must reflect thoughtfully on those we have lost and ask ourselves why.

In conclusion, it is clear that 50 years after the Supreme Court ruling on Brown, significant gains have been made in race relations. It is also clear that African Americans still remain disproportionately poor and socially disadvantaged in many ways.

Consequently, rather than tangible symbols of success, the legacy of Brown remains largely in the realms of idealism and promise of a fair and just society.

It is critical that we realize that the struggle is far from over, that the battle is far from won and that all of us have a critical role to play before we can claim victory. The Supreme Court ruling represented only a clearing of the ground. Now there is an urgent imperative for all of us to design and build a structure that will translate into real and lasting success for the African-American community, and the nation as a whole.

Thank you.