

African American Chronicle

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Devoted To Black History • Culture • Contributions • Struggles • Achievements

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LIVING LEGENDS

◆◆◆◆◆ Asa G. Hilliard III, Ed. D. ◆◆◆◆◆

Dr. Hilliard, where were you born, and tell us about your family?

I was born in Galveston, Texas, the oldest of eight children, to Asa Hilliard II, principal of a Black high school as was his father, Asa Hilliard I, before him. Of the five boys and three girls in our family, I have a sister who is a professor in Denver, a brother who is a clinical psychologist working in education, and another sister teaching in Houston.

Dr. Hilliard, why is the study of African and African-American history and culture important to our students?

My teacher, Dr. John Clark, has often said that African history is the missing pages of world history. Students have to know they don't have complete and accurate history if African history is missing. It's the history that people of African-American descent played on the world stage and must not be missing from the schools. Until African history is placed in the whole picture of human history, any other picture we have will be in error.

What is your definition of a good education, and a good student?

A good educator? I think human beings are fundamentally inquisitive, and a good teacher is one who is inquisitive, and stimulates students to be the same way. The education enterprise is one where both the teacher and students are searching for the answers to questions. A good teacher is a good student.

You have developed a series of study trips to Egypt, the seat of early civilization. What stimulated you to initiate this program? How did the participants react? What had its greatest impact on you?

A trip to Egypt is the antidote to Tarzan pictures and the poor image that people have of Africa and the incorrect information they have. After I got into it, I found how profound the influence of Ancient Egypt was on world civilization. Since my first trip there, it has been very exciting.

I have done tours now for the better part of the past decade. I've taken several hundred people to Egypt on these tours, and one of the most frequent comments I hear is, "The trip changed my life!" It has been the highlight in many lives, and many have gone more than once. We recently had a reunion of our participants in Atlanta, and over a third came to reminisce.

The greatest impact is always the fact that so much history still remains in the archeological remains of the actual building structures. To see things standing after 5,000 years — that's incredibly impressive. To see something as ancient as that standing 42 stories tall, with each stone at least 2 tons and some 40 tons, and over two million stones to make a pyramid, and over 80 pyramids to see — that's what is so impressive.

As you see it, what will it take for African-American history to be infused into the fabric of the school curriculum?

I think it's going to take a lot of homework on the part of educators — a lot of reading, so they understand how deep the information is. As far as Afro-centrism is concerned, that will be a part of community education in the African-American community itself for its children. In the public school, we want a pluralistic curriculum that includes the experiences of *all* groups — a multi-cultural

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Asa G. Hilliard III

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experience. Afro-centrism (I don't ordinarily use that term) is something the African-American community taught, passing on the culture and traditions to the children; if some people think it's anti-white, they are wrong. Under no circumstances is it anti-white or anti-Western; it is anti-falsehood, it is pro-truth.

As you see it, what can be done to substantially improve the academic achievements of African-American students?

I think the major thing is that we have to realize there are many examples of teachers and schools that are very successful in teaching African-American students. Those examples should be copied by those who are not getting the best results now. There are schools in African American communities where children are the academic leaders in the school district — they not only do well, but they lead the academic efforts of other schools. That should be copied by other schools. Good teachers should be the teachers of other successful teachers.

How can we increase the expectations which teachers and other adults have of African-American students?

By giving them exposure to high quality public schools that are working, and when they see that you can take any child and help that child to be a high performer, that should change the expectations for all children.

As you view history, who are some of your heroes?

I have many. One would be the leaders of the Haitian revolution in the early 1800's: Toussaint L'ouverture, Henry Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessolaines. Then there is Marcus Garvey in the early 1900's, who led a world-wide mission mobilizing African people for self-help including African-Americans. People don't normally realize how widespread his influence was. Then there is W.E.B. du Bois, because of his leadership in academics and also in the Pan-African movement; he was also a great human rights activist in the United States; also Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida for Blacks.

Who influenced you most to become an educator?

My father, I suppose, because we have such a long education tradition. I found myself drawn to this field both by my father and by his father, both principals of Black high schools in Texas during the segregation era.

We are planning to develop an exchange program between African and American students. Is this a good idea in your opinion, and if so, what benefits would you anticipate?

It is an excellent idea. The benefits would be mutual: for the African students and also the American students. It will broaden the perspective of all students when they have the opportunity to get exposure to people in other parts of the world and their different cultures. It may stimulate a continuing interest that will persist through many years.

We are working with Dr. Leon Sullivan to initiate a "Teachers for Africa" program beginning in September 1992. Why is this program important?

At this point, Africa is so short of resources. One of the best

Overview

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protect the students. On October 2, 1957 the nine students and Ms. Bates entered the school. This celebrated case required courage and commitment on the part of the students, adults and the President.

Racial conflict became a part of the desegregation/integration movement. Several methods were used to racially integrate the schools. Busing students was one of the methods. It became an emotional issue. In communities, both North and South, controversy erupted. There was rage and violence.

Desegregation touched public schools as well as colleges and universities. The call for a desegregation plan provided compliance in some cities and outrage in others. Many children, youth, parents, teachers and leaders showed unusual interest in educational opportunities.

contributions we can make to help them is provide educators — they need hundreds of thousands to meet their needs. Until the time when they can make it on their own, sending teachers would be a very important contribution at this time.

Back to African-American history and culture: is it your belief that when people have knowledge of their history and heritage their self-esteem is enhanced?

It is extremely important that that not be the primary reason. The big reason is that we have had four centuries of defamation that have distorted the true record. We must correct the record, then secondarily the self-esteem will be a by-product.

What advice would you give students today?

I would give them the advice my mother gave me: (2 Timothy 2:15) "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

What do you say to non-African-American students about the advisability of learning African-American history?

I think it is absolutely essential, because it is a part of their own history — just as the rest of world history is a part of African history. It is important they not be restricted to a single angle of the human experience.

In terms of education, what do you recommend to education policy-makers?

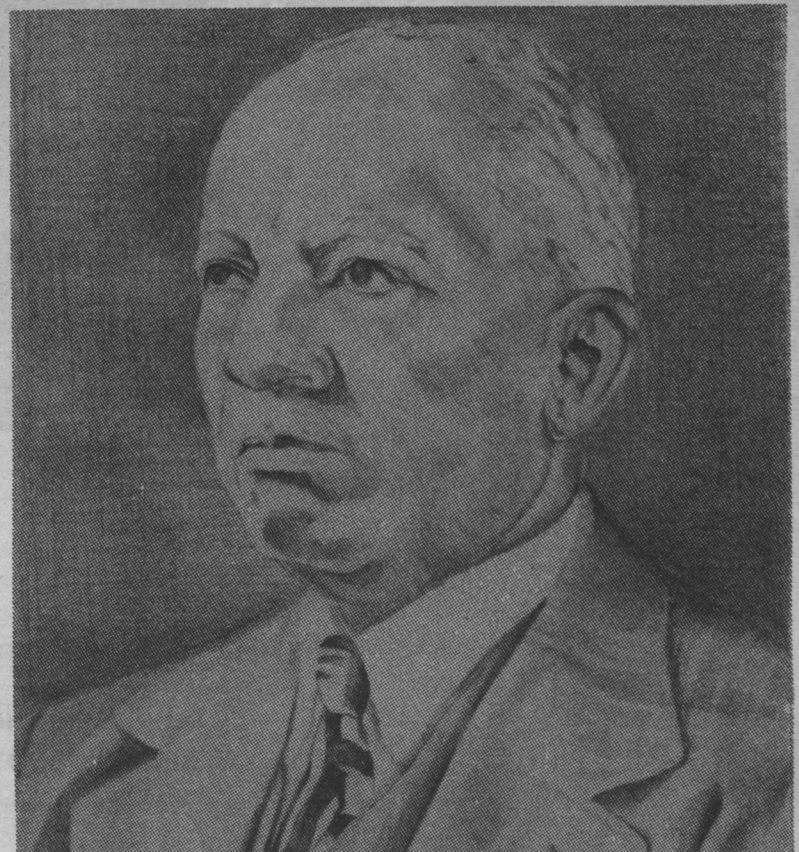
I think I would make the same recommendation that I just made earlier — helping teachers to be better — policy-makers ought to spend as much time as possible with examples of the best practices in education, so that their policy is guided by positive realities rather than theories. Many people spend so much time in policy they don't have a good image of what their policies are trying to create.

What are some of the serious problems in education, and what solutions do you propose?

The most serious are what Jonathan Kozol calls the "savage inequalities" — the gap between the resources provided to the poor and the rich schools in America.

Finally, what do you recommend to students regarding education?

The main thing is that it is a process that will never stop. They should look ahead with hope and joy that they can always be involved in some kind of education process, for the rest of their lives!



Carter G. Woodson

"The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself."

—Carter G. Woodson
Historian-Educator
1875-1950