

Detours on the road from slavery to freedom

Written by Marian Wright Edelman NNPA Columnist
Tuesday, 19 June 2012 15:59

On Saturday, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati hosted a Juneteenth celebration commemorating the jubilant day in 1865 when the last Black slaves got word they were free more than two and a half years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Labor, civil rights, education, and community leaders, child advocates, and citizens conducted a silent march Sunday in New York City to protest the New York Police Department's "stop and frisk" policing tactics. These two events, at very different places and times, are connected as part of the slow, hard and unfinished journey towards freedom and racial justice in our nation. Although we have come a very long way on the arduous road from slavery to freedom, we still have a long way to go.

The recent death of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla. and the brutal hateful murder of James Anderson by a gang of young White men in Jackson, Miss. attest to this continuing reality.

So does the persistent mass incarceration of Black and Latino sons, fathers, and potential leaders which is becoming the new American apartheid or the new Jim Crow as Michelle Alexander calls it in her important bestselling book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. That we have the world's largest incarcerated population—our incarceration rate exceeds China, Russia, and India combined—is the end result of a national Cradle to Prison Pipeline® crisis which is lodged at the intersection of continuing poverty and racial disparities in American life. A Black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a Latino boy a one in six chance of the same fate. Children of color, especially males, face an uphill battle in overcoming poverty (one in five Black children is poor) and continuing racial barriers and stereotyping.

An analysis of New York Police Department data by the New York Civil Liberties Union showed that more than 96 percent of the students arrested in the city school system in the first three months of 2012 were Black and Latino, and more than 73 percent were male. Police were 12 times more likely to arrest a Black student than a White one. It's time to get the police out of the schools; to stop the massive suspension and arrest of children for nonviolent offenses; and to stop the criminalization of children at younger and younger ages. It makes no sense for unarmed six, seven, and eight year olds to be handcuffed and arrested for nonviolent offenses. Sometimes I think many adults have lost our common and moral sense and forgotten the purpose of public education which is to educate and prepare children for the future not exclude or bar them in huge numbers every year. Some schools are initiating restorative justice practices which discipline children without excluding them from desperately needed education.

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The June 17 march was a silent protest against the stop and frisk tactics that purport to stave off crime and get guns off New York City's streets—a goal I certainly share. But in 99.9 percent of these searches guns were not found. In reality, stop and frisk may simply terrify and criminalize Black and Brown boys and young men and empower police to randomly stop, search, and demand account from Black and Latino boys and men ostensibly born free. Black and Latino young men ages 14 to 24 are less than 5 percent of the city's population but are 41.6 percent of the stops. The reality in New York City today shows we are still far from being a free and just land.

How far have we come on the road from slavery to freedom isn't just a rhetorical question more than 150 years later. A people who don't know their history are more likely to repeat it. The resurgence of hate crimes and emergence of mass incarceration of males of color remind us that freedom requires constant vigilance and justice needs a fire that burns in all of us.

I believe that we are in the second post-Reconstruction era—a view shared by distinguished historians David Levering Lewis, two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of W.E.B. Du Bois, and Khalil Gibran Muhammad, director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and author of *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. They and civil rights icons including Myrlie Evers-Williams, Andrew Young, James Lawson, Vincent Harding, Ruby Bridges and many others will join us at the Children's Defense Fund's national conference in Cincinnati July 22-25 to examine the racial signs of our times, affirming our great progress, but ensuring we continue to move forward—and not backwards—on the still incomplete road to freedom. Although some forms of continuing racial intolerance are overt, some forms are subtle, covert, technical, political, and very polite. Wrapped up in new euphemisms, better etiquette, and clever political rhetoric, it's still, as Frederick Douglass warned, the same old snake. Let's call it out systematically, oppose it nonviolently, and move forward on becoming a free and just nation.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.