

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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ASPIRE

If a person were to only judge African-American culture based solely on the majority of television programming currently being offered, the representation would be quite sad.

Much of the programming targeting the African-American viewer is reality-based shows featuring often dysfunctional, emotionally unstable characters who are in chaotic situations and relationships. Regardless of the network, whether it's "Real Housewives of Atlanta," "Love and Hip-Hop," "Single Ladies" or even the disjointed BET Awards, the portrayals have been far less than positive. Even the wildly popular ABC series, "Scandal," which features a strong African-American lead, Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, has the character relegated to being the "side chick" of a married white man.

With so much negative imagery of African-Americans, what many are asking is, "Where can we go to see positive images of African-Americans?" Earvin "Magic" Johnson asked that very question, and when he couldn't come up with a consistent source for positive African-American programming, he created one.

Johnson, former NBA star turned business mogul, launched ASPIRE – a joint venture with Comcast and GMC Network – in June of last year and by year's end, the family-friendly network targeting African-Americans will be in 18 million households. For Johnson, where others saw despair, he saw opportunity.

"One of the reasons Magic partnered with GMC is because we had a lot of positive programs featuring African-Americans," said Ty Johnson, vice president of Multicultural Sales and Development for GMC and ASPIRE. "Magic thought this type programming should be available 24/7. That's what we do. We celebrate our past, our now and our next."

ASPIRE, which can be seen locally on Comcast 171, offers a diverse programming mix of movies, series and specials featuring music, comedy, drama, faith and inspiration, theater/performing arts, lifestyle and news/information. The burgeoning network has also partnered with the African Black Film Festival (ABFF) to present original movies and documentaries.

Some of the original programming that can be found on ASPIRE includes the reality program, "UNCF, The Next Generation," which follows a group of students from their junior year in high school all the way through their first year of college. And though the United Negro College Fund, which supports historically Black colleges and universities, presents the program, the students attend a diverse variety of colleges from junior colleges to Harvard University. The show is hosted and narrated by Laurence Fishburne.

'Magic' Johnson encourages African-Americans to ASPIRE with launch of new network; focus on family-fr

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"Laurence Fishburne was so passionate about this series that he insisted he had to be the voice and host," said Ty Johnson, who was in Minneapolis this past week to promote the network.

For music lovers, ASPIRE is the new home of the iconic "Soul Train." The network also offers "Groundbreaking Music," hosted by Esperanza Spalding, who connects the dots from early spirituals to gospel, Broadway, jazz, R&B, rock & roll, soul, funk, disco, pop and hip-hop. And for fans of comedy, ASPIRE offers "We Got Next," a series of stand-up comedy featuring up and coming "urban" comedians. "We Got Next" is the creation of Russell Simmons and Bob Sumner – the duo that birthed "Def Comedy Jam."

"The twist here is these kids have got to be clean," said Ty Johnson.

The network also features "I Aspire" vignettes focusing on the accomplishments of everyday African-Americans. "I Aspire" presents stories of everyone from a fireman to a set of male and female twins who both became Olympic gold medal fencers.

"We want to speak to the urban professional who says there's nothing on TV for me. And we stay true to our core values of family," said Ty Johnson.

For more on ASPIRE, check local listening or visit www.aspire.tv .