

AN APPEAL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: 1960-2010

A LOOK BACK TO CHART A WAY FORWARD

On March 9, 1960, “An Appeal for Human Rights” (the Appeal) appeared in three Atlanta daily newspapers. The Manifesto was a paid advertisement, requested and financed by the college presidents, heralding the beginning of a sit-in campaign being launched by students of the Atlanta University Center (AUC). The Appeal captured the essence of the students’ purpose when it proclaimed that “Every normal being wants to walk the earth with dignity and abhors any and all proscriptions placed upon him because of race or color.”

Young people today cannot imagine having to find the “colored” public restroom, to search for a “colored” lunch counter, or, if traveling by bus, having to find the “colored” waiting room with the “colored” water fountain. These legally- imposed requirements eroded the dignity and self-respect of all people of color. However, in 1960, the “sirens of freedom” were being heard throughout the colonized world, and they were heard by the “Greensboro Four” who served as the catalyst for igniting a movement which changed the South, the Nation, and eventually the world.

On February 1, 1960, when the Greensboro Four from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College sat down at a racially segregated Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, they ignited “embers” that had been smoldering for centuries deep in the souls of African Americans. Within a few weeks, between that fateful day and the publication of the Appeal, sit-in demonstrations were cropping up throughout the South. Students from the Atlanta University Center (Atlanta University, Clark, Morehouse, Morris Brown, Spelman colleges and the Interdenominational Theological Center) decided to follow a well-planned, coordinated approach with a clearly articulated purpose for the forthcoming Atlanta student demonstrations.

The focus of the demonstrations would extend beyond access to public accommodations and include the eradication of inequities in education, jobs, housing, voting, hospitals and law enforcement. Therefore, on March 15, 1960, exactly six days following publication of the Appeal, the Atlanta Student Movement launched non-violent sit-ins, pickets and boycotts that eventually resulted in the disintegration of legal apartheid in the city of Atlanta.

Without question, the sit-in movement became one of the crucial elements of many events that converged to create dramatic and irreversible social and legal change in the South. Perhaps the most significant force at work in our city and the nation was the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who, through the Montgomery Bus Boycott, pioneered the use of nonviolent civil disobedience in the cause of justice.

How clearly Dr. King articulated his vision, as he effectively communicated his faith to thousands of young people, continues to amaze us, even today. Most of us had never heard of non-violent civil disobedience, and might have argued that it would not work, given the force of the opposition. However, as we followed the examples of Gandhi and Dr. King, we proved that we had the discipline to endure taunts and abuse from angry mobs of whites who believed that they had license to verbally abuse us and to commit violent acts against us with impunity. In contrast to most of the white racists who opposed us, we were well-dressed and well- behaved. This contrast seemed to have aroused the “dozing conscience of America” and the world. As the non-violent movement gained impetus, many factors came into play; among them were the media.

The rapid dissemination of the news made possible by television played a large part in the success of the sit-in movement. Breaking news with live coverage was an exciting aspect of this new medium. Throughout the

country, and eventually the world, America was exposed for what it was: a nation that preached democracy, liberty, and justice for all, yet practiced one of the most egregious forms of racism the world had ever known.

Ironically, the entire South benefitted from the abuses and sacrifices sustained by the nonviolent demonstrations of the student movement. Dr. King described it eloquently when he observed that “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

The city of Atlanta emerged as a major beneficiary of the Atlanta Student Movement. For example, the number of Fortune 500 companies that established Atlanta as headquarters or as a regional center for commerce, the top tier sports franchisees that perform and reside here, the quantum growth of the convention and hospitality industry, and the development of a thriving artistic and multicultural environment are direct outcomes of the changed image of this once virulently racist city. The Olympic spotlight could not have showcased Atlanta in 1960; the rest of the world would have declined to come.

As we look back over 50 years, we must acknowledge the significant progress that has been made in our country. Achievements that we could only dream of prior to 1960 have become a reality. Upon critical examination, however, one must conclude that the umbrella of freedom, justice, and equality for all people still does not extend to large segments of our society. As in the Appeal of 1960, the Appeal of 2010 is being issued to address the categories that continue to require remedy.

(1) Education:

The persistent failure of traditional public education to design and implement an educational curriculum that addresses the needs of African American students is vividly displayed throughout the United States; the Atlanta Public School System is no exception.

In 2010, the Atlanta Public School System, though endowed with a budget in excess of 600 million dollars and a student population that is one-half the number that it was in 1973 with a budget of 100 million dollars, still languishes behind in student achievement when compared with its suburban counterparts. The achievement gap is wide and ever-widening. In 1954, the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* was supposed to provide an equal educational opportunity for all citizens, regardless of color. However, in the past 50 years, tremendous “white flight” has occurred in Atlanta, and the so-called “soft bigotry” of low expectations burst upon the education scene and continues to thrive, to the detriment of children who come from families that can ill afford to receive an inferior education.

Many research institutions have studied the failure of public education to raise the educational achievement levels of minority and low-income students, yet policy makers have lent a deaf ear.

The Johns Hopkins University conducted a study of Georgia Dropout Rates and concluded that the high schools in Georgia's inner cities are "Drop-Out Factories." They studied 142 schools in 78 counties and concluded that for the three years (2005-2008), the targeted schools had drop-out rates ranging from 39.6 to 89.8, with the average school having a drop-out rate in excess of 50%. This statistic is unacceptable in our society and is in dire need of amelioration.

Additionally, our schools have become "mini-prisons" since the Columbine incident in Colorado a few years ago. The students at Columbine were majority white; however, the educational establishment cracked down and hired Resource Officers (police officers) to work in many schools in America. Therefore, children who are accused of misbehavior, and were once sent to the Principal's office, now find themselves funneled to Resource Officers, who cart them off to jail and thereby create the beginning of a criminal justice system record that haunts the child throughout his/her life. Moreover, recent research shows that the overwhelming majority of students who receive these harsh penalties, especially in the South, are African American boys.

Illustrative of this point are data from the State of Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice for the years 2006 to 2008 depicted below. This information clearly shows that the “pipeline to prison” for too many African American children begins in elementary school. The data is from Fulton County, Georgia. It shows, by designated year, the total number of young people who were placed in the Juvenile Justice System, by race, during the respective years represented.

FULTON COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE (SUMMARY)

<u>YEARS</u>	<u>BLACK</u>	<u>WHITEHISPANIC</u>	<u>-12</u>	<u>13-16</u>	<u>16+</u>
2008	159,6403,016	1,192	2,941	60,054	103,215
2007	155,9763,191	2,284	3657	64,772	94,897
2006	149,9564,446	3,328	3,049	62,394	93,006

Much has been written about the “pipeline to prison.” Of equal concern, however, is the paucity of African American students attending formerly all-white institutions of higher learning. Although some progress has been made in this area much more needs to be done. We reviewed data covering the entire State of Georgia and found the same startling statistics.

In 1960, on the university level, Georgia’s institutions were all segregated. It was not until the fall of 1960 that the first two African Americans integrated the University of Georgia. Although this event did not result from the student movement, it seemed to indicate a change in the right direction. Since then, state institutions of higher education have been integrated, but in much smaller numbers than one would expect. For example, in 2008, only 7% of the University of Georgia, 6% of Georgia Tech, and 27% of Georgia State students were African-American.

If Atlanta is to fulfill its destiny as a great American city, it is incumbent upon all to take the necessary steps to rectify the subtle and insidious attitudes that continue to assign minority and poor students to an inferior education that forever hinders their ability to participate in “the American Dream.” We *must* eradicate the toxins of low expectations, presumed inferiority, and the lack of commitment and profound neglect that are consuming the lives of African American children and depriving them of even a modicum of hope.

Therefore, we, the veterans of the 1960’s Committee on “The Appeal for Human Rights,” once again pledge to join those individuals and groups who are committed to educational excellence for each student, regardless of race or zip code; to help inspire students to develop a sense of individual worth that will propel them to contribute positively as concerned, responsible citizens of our global society.

(2)Jobs

The 1960 Appeal noted that “Negroes are denied employment in the majority of city, state, and federal governmental jobs, except in the most menial capacities.” African Americans continue to be last hired, first fired and suffer disproportionately during economic downturns. Nevertheless, there have been substantial gains in African American employment in several categories over the past 50 years, while, conversely, there have been quantum gains in white employment opportunities. Despite increased employment opportunities, however, the income gap between African Americans and whites continues to expand.

(3)Housing:

In 1960, Atlanta’s African American population was 32 percent, restricted to live on 16 percent of the land. Today, the city is majority African American and federal law prohibits segregated housing based on race. Beginning in the late 1960’s, however, a major migration to the suburbs that included large numbers of whites

and middle to upper- income African Americans changed Atlanta's racial demographics. The result of this migration has been *de facto* segregation, which isolates poorer African Americans in segregated enclaves.

The current economic downturn is transforming working and middle class neighborhoods into disaster areas because of foreclosures. However, other factors that contribute to the rapid deterioration of low-income areas occupied by African Americans is the failure by municipal government to enact single-occupancy zoning in those neighborhoods, as well as the assignment of far too many Section 8 residents into African American communities.

(4)Voting:

The Atlanta Student Movement was one of the many movements that contributed to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The "foot soldiers" who marched for human rights in Atlanta and voting rights in Selma in 1965, were not all students, but many of them were. The spark that started in North Carolina included young and old alike who were determined to make this most basic of all changes: the right to vote without arbitrary impediments imposed by government officials. The number of African American elected and appointed officials in all sections of the country, and at all levels of government, is one of the movement's legacies. This, of course, includes the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

In 1960, there was a prevailing feeling that the defeat of racist politicians who would be replaced by African Americans or enlightened whites would lead to more effective representation for the African American community. Over the past 50 years, we have observed that far too many African American elected and appointed officials, and many other progressive politicians, have not worked aggressively for the underserved communities whose votes helped elect them to office. In addition, in the State of Georgia, over 400,000 African Americans are eligible to vote, but have failed to do so. Thus, the full impact of the Voting Rights Act has not yet been realized.

(5)Hospitals:

The 1960 Appeal noted that hospitals were as racially segregated as all other aspects of society. Today, Atlanta has become a regional hub for medical care that can be used by all. The poor, largely minority population continues to be underserved, even if patients can no longer be turned away by race. The issue now is universal access to health care. Should the current attempt in Washington, D. C. to provide universal health care to most Americans fail, the city and the nation will be harmed.

(6)Law Enforcement:

The 1960 Appeal identified "grave inequalities in the area of law enforcement." The number of African American police officers was reported to be a total of 32. That number has undergone a quantum shift. The district attorney, judges and other court officers do reflect the ethnic make-up of the city. Despite these changes, there is a continuing struggle with crime and police brutality. There are a disproportionate number of African American young males who make up the majority of the prison population, both in Georgia and throughout the nation. In 1954, according to the United States Department of Justice,

34 percent of all prisoners in the United States were African American. By 2006, that number had increased to 48 percent, and in the old States of the Confederacy, African Americans, mostly men, averaged over 60 percent of the total prison population.

According to some reports, Georgia has the highest percentage of African Americans in prison in the entire United States. The cost of educating a child averages 9,000 dollars per year. The average cost of incarceration is 50,000 dollars per year. These data lend credence to the notion that America seems to prefer incarceration to education in its treatment of African American citizens, many of whom have fought for this country. Those

who are younger are being deprived of the opportunity to contribute their talents and creativity toward the betterment of their communities.

CONCLUSION

This review of the 1960 Appeal reveals just how far we have come and how much further we need to travel. There has been substantial amelioration of the concerns outlined by the students from 1960. The tone and environment the students helped create shaped legislation addressing fair housing, voting rights, and employment. We joined with students from throughout the nation to gain access to all public accommodations and move this nation towards ridding itself of preaching democracy and freedom for all, while denying it to millions of its citizens. By so doing, we were simply building on all the efforts made by others who fought for civil and human rights throughout American history.

The “colored” and “white” signs have come down, but enemies of full democracy are alive and well. For example, our current President of the United States is African American; however, he has the dubious distinction of being the only President in history to have over 100 plus nominees held up by one Senator from Alabama for approximately a year. Usually, a president is given the right to choose his aides, regardless of party, barring issues of moral turpitude or dubious background.

America has come a long way since 1960 towards extending the umbrella of freedom to those citizens who had historically been denied; however, a critical analysis of today’s environment will demonstrate to the reasonable person that all is still not well and that much more requires our diligent action. The forces opposed to full freedom for peoples of color have not yielded one iota. Therefore, the current generation of students and people who believe that America should practice what it preaches, must not rest on accomplishments achieved over the past 50 years. Instead, the current generation must arm itself intellectually to non-violently battle those forces who seek to turn back the clock to pre-1960, and reinstate an America wherein the beacon of freedom will not burn for people of color.

If the Atlanta Student Movement of the 1960s can offer anything to present day activists, it is this: When you become involved in a mission that is more important than your own personal safety, you are changed forever, and you may also change the world. Although the challenges you encounter may differ from those we faced, the process you go through will be similar to ours: develop a common goal, articulate that goal, join with others in pursuit of that goal, and persevere to the end in the pursuit of “liberty and justice for all.”

James Felder – Former President, SGA, Clark Atlanta University – (1960)

Marion Bennett – Former President, SGA, Interdenominational Theological Center – (1960)

Donald Clark – Former President, SGA, Morehouse College – (1960)

Mary Ann Smith Wilson – Former Secretary, SGA, Morris Brown College – (1960)

Roslyn Pope – Former President, SGA, Spelman College – (1960)

Lonnie King Jr. – Founding Chairman, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights – (1960)

Herschelle Sullivan Challenor – Former Co-Chairperson, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights – (1960)

Johnny Parham – Founding member, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights – (1960)

Charles A. Black – Former Chairman, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights – (1961)

Daniel Mitchell – Former Co-Chairman, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights – (1962)

David Satcher – Former Chairman, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights – (1964)