

"REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER"

A Speech by Vernon L. Barkstall
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On the Occasion of the
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Urban League of Champaign County

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"REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER"

Introductory Comments

Thank you all for that warm greeting. This is Urban League Family; everyone is significant in our Movement. In that vein, I will not ask you to stand, but I merely say thanks to all League volunteers -- Guild, Board, and Staff -- past and present, and all League members and supporters over the years. Give a hand to all.

Join with me as I salute Carol and my children (Jeffrey, Lisa, and Karen). They have given much to the League through sharing me all these years.

Allow me to dedicate this evening to the memory of those former board members who have departed this world and, therefore, cannot share this evening with us. The list is too long to recite in full, but a sampling of names includes Marguerite Johnson, Vivian McPherson, Donald E. Moyer, Sr., Charles E. Phillips, Sr., John R. White, Kenneth Stratton, Pete Kelker, and two of my closest friends, Bob Harden and Chuck Petry. Let's recognize all of the above and others not named.

My talk this evening centers around reflections on my career as the CEO of the Urban League of one of the better communities in America.

- Now, let me hurriedly disabuse you of the notion that I am about to deliver an innocuous discourse on the unfailing virtues of Champaign County, its people, and its institutions.

To be certain, we are blessed with large numbers of good and virtuous people, and where we find sensitive, progressive institutions I give credit to its top management.

My talk will take into brief account:

1. Some major influences in shaping my personality and attitudes about dealing with people...
2. My view of race relations here, and to some extent, nationally since 1966, and
3. Finally, I will suggest a few avenues -- broad and specific -- which beg our attention.

Major Influences

Some of my earliest recollections of life center around race. For example, when I was about five years old, we lived in a row of flats on the corner of two alleys. The "street" deadended at a factory where fourteen years later I would get my first full time job. On heavy rain days the drain in the alley would clog, and the low spots would flood. Men in the upper floors of the offices would throw pennies to see us scramble for the coins. One day I caught a "hot" penny which was heated by men in the "lab" and flicked to the kids below -- GREAT SPORT. I later worked in that building for five years. Since blacks were not allowed on the upper floors unless we were specifically directed, I never did get to see that "lab".

- Prior to going out into the real world (first grade) my mother told me about racism and how I should act, react, etc... My mom was a passive, accept life as it comes person. My dad was more assertive. They both taught us to live by the "Golden Rule"; but my dad would insist, "don't fear anyone, and don't let anyone misuse you because of the color of your skin or theirs."

My dad taught us, "If you aren't itching, don't scratch." That adage goes back to the days of vicious racism in the South when black males of any age could not look whites in the eyes and talk as equals. Sometimes in feigned deference, but most often out of real fear, black men would look downward and scratch themselves while "yes-siring" and "yes-mamming" white men and women -- some of whom were barely, if at all, out their teens.

- I progressed through the various stages of life and faced dehumanizing encounters of racism at every level of interaction with whites.
- Even up South in Columbus we had separate playgrounds and YM and YWCAs. We had one outdoor pool for all of the blacks in Columbus -- not counting Alum Creek, two good sized rivers, and the deadly gravel pits.
- After WWII we gradually were allowed to patronize the downtown theaters, and on Monday nights we could rent one of the "for whites only" roller rinks where they made more money off the blacks in one night than they often made in a week off whites.

- Military, college, and professional life did not bring about significant progress. I came to realize that racism seemed to have a life of its own which shamelessly damages the quality of life for the oppressor as well as the oppressed.
- Reading and listening to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X convinced me that dealing with racism was a larger calling for me than my first love of teaching.
- I had to be persuaded by a friend to go to work for the Urban League. Unlike the NAACP, the Urban League gave us poor folk the notion that they were too accommodating to the white power structure, and their works were primarily in the interest of better educated, middle-class blacks.

My friend convinced me that there was room for me in the League and I didn't have to "scratch when not itching."

- So here I am, and as I promised my dad long ago, there has been no scratching without the mandatory itch. Most of you will recall my tornado fight in 1974. Well, I have keloids which itch like the dickens from time-to-time. I can't scratch now without making certain no white person is talking to me at the time.
- A firm belief of mine is that one who tells whites only that which he or she thinks they want to hear isn't worth a darn to blacks or whites, or to the cause of racial justice.

Racism In 1966 and Beyond

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I came to town in June, 1966, to help Champaign Countians deal with racism here. Before I could settle in, I was faced with a realtor who sold a house on West Clark Street within hours which he had not been able to move in several months. He sold it to an agent on his staff. He did this, after Carol and I had offered to pay the full asking price for the house.

- We finally bought a house on Foley Street. I later learned that the perhaps poorest, least educated man on the street had attempted to organize his neighbors to block our purchase of the house.
- Right away our advocacy efforts kicked in in quest of systems change. John Lee Johnson and Roy Williams were among the most highly visible activists. They worked alone as well as in concert with groups such as the Urban League, NAACP, Council for Community Integration, Concerned Citizens for Quality Education, People's Poverty Board, and several equal employment opportunity committees.

Petty gangs and general malaise from within, and blatant racism from without wreaked havoc on the black community. Progressive blacks and their allies were faced with intransigence and other obstacles in every avenue of life.

- Even the government run job service was blatantly racist in its referral practices toward blacks. It took the presence of Joe Ganns and Ernest Westfield to change referral practices.

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- Discrimination in housing was a major problem.
- Both school districts (IV and 116) were defacto segregated at the elementary level and there was heavy sentiment in both communities to keep them that way. The Urbana board was resourceful, yet crass. They shipped the children of voteless foreign students to Hays School (now King), and involuntarily bused black children to underrepresented schools across town.
- The Unit IV Board was more intransigent and, only under heavy pressure, established a committee which, over my objection, came up with a plan palatable to whites wherein blacks were to bear the lion's share of the burden of busing if they "wanted their children to sit next to whites in school." That philosophy is as flawed and racist today as it was twenty-seven years ago.
- The University of Illinois shared with Chanute and other major employers in town the practice of placing non-job related barriers to employment in the paths of the underclass which was disproportionately black.
- Arnetta Collins (now Rodgers) and James Dudley demonstrated in their master's thesis that the medical community in general was not very responsive to the needs of low-income pregnant black women.

- Champaign police chief Don Carter has said on numerous occasions that when it comes to racism our community is average at best. He notes further, that the force will reflect the values of the community from which it is drawn. In short, in matters of race our police forces are about average. That is an improvement over the 1960s. My earliest impressions were; that on a mini-scale, local police were about as vicious as those in Columbus, Ohio. Blacks in Columbus were warned "if in danger, call anyone except a Columbus policeman."
- By 1966 only four blacks had been hired on faculty at the University of Illinois. All others have come since my arrival here. I take no credit for that.
- In 1966 only one lending institution had popular appeal in the black community. Thanks to John Lee Johnson, the Community Reinvestment Act, and institution leaders -- some of whom had to be brought kicking and screaming to the bargaining table -- the banking climate has changed. Whether praise is due awaits comparative data on services to blacks and their low to moderate income white counterparts.
- Finally, in this vein, the pastor of one white church that we visited changed his theme in midsermon to make the racial metaphor that "black birds fly with black birds, and white birds fly with white ones." Within minutes after the service an assistant pastor was at our door to tell us that his pastor

had sent him to tell us he thought we might feel more comfortable at their sister church in Urbana.

- Today, things are better for educated middle class blacks; on the other hand, poorer blacks are worse off today than in the 60s and they suffer less hope than the generation a quarter century ago. Their fear is compounded by gang bangers whom they do not know from their childhoods, and the devastating presence of mind altering drugs.

Black Culpability

- Blacks need not take comfort in placing all of the blame on white racism although that is a major cause of the problems and their symptoms with which we must deal. After all, I hear many blacks saying to other blacks:
- Why won't you flip hamburgers or work in a grocery store, or anywhere else for that matter?
- Why do you sell and/or use drugs? The white man may ship them in here -- and the pipes to go with them, but he doesn't force you to use them; and he doesn't make you callous enough to sell drugs to your brothers and sisters; or rob and kill to support the deadly habit.
- Some ask why you put pressure on achieving blacks to not achieve.
- Why do you too often equate fatherhood and a gun with manhood? Neither is a requisite rite of passage to manhood.

There are a whole litany of these and other shortcomings that one can see in many young, and not so young, blacks. Many of these frailties can be laid at the alter of racism. Many are merely excuses, alibis, or crutches for failed individuals. Many failed on their own, and many got all of the help they needed. Regardless, they and their progeny are here. They must be dealt with or dealt on. I prefer the first option. Only a few short years from now minorities will be predominant in the workforce of America. It is in the national interest that we not lose this generation. They are not biodegradable. We cannot throw them away without dire consequences.

Unfortunately, too many Americans would opt to throw them away rather than open society to them on equal terms. It is patently unfair to discriminate on a racial basis at nearly every turn and expect the victim to compete successfully in the face of unequal terms.

- Not long ago, a friend asked me, "Vern, are African-Americans conscious of their blackness every day of their lives?" My hasty response was an emphatic "YES." Now, I don't mean the handwringing, woe is me, I don't think I can take it anymore kind of consciousness. You learn to cope, compete successfully, or cave-in. On second thought, there are a few black revisionists who would deny that racism exists; that may be how they cope. Then there are the so-called black conservatives who see the overdependence on government and others to do what one ought to do for oneself. They are right, but they lose influence in the black community because

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they often seek to outdo the diatribe of the racist conservative whites (the Rush Limbaugh School, if you will).

- Let me make it plain here that I am not using conservatism and white racism interchangeably. Jack Kemp is welcomed and can speak almost anywhere in black America. And perhaps to the surprise of many here tonight I share Barry Goldwater's appeal to Republicans to get the racism out of their conservative line. There are far more blacks who share and would vote conservative values were it not for the transparent appeal to racism so deeply ingrained in much of the conservative jargon.
- Are we blacks overwhelmingly conscious of our blackness. Of course we are; America makes us so; and Louis Farrakhan is taking license with that fact.

Blacks at every level recognize that as Malcolm X said, "blacks catch hell in America for only one reason, their skin color." Minister Farrakhan's brush has broadened its swath from strictly race to include religion and sexual orientation (homophobia); and that stands to be his undoing.

Minister Farrakhan was on a mission to strike accord with mainline black leadership in America. Lately, he and Khalid Abdul Muhammad and their sweeping attacks have been their own worst enemy.

Black Americans are overwhelmingly Christians and are practically blind to any other religion. They also tend to oppose sweeping generalities about everything except "we catch

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hell in America only because we are black;" and we do not hold all whites responsible for that fact.

For those who have nearly lost all hope, the Farrakhan message lends a ray of hope. Who else but the Nation of Islam has issued forth a conservative self-help, clean-up and clean-out your bodies, be thrifty conservative agenda that has more than passing appeal to America's most downtrodden.

Well, that appeal is wide in America's prisons and it is beginning to make inroads into the college campuses. Can Farrakhan tone down the demagoguery as Malcolm X was about to do? If the broadening message can be refocused to strictly racism, Farrakhan stands a chance to strike common ground with mainline black leadership. Otherwise he is doomed to failure, and in the long run America will be worse off for it; because in concert with mainstream black leadership, programs of education and training stand a chance of reaching the disadvantaged masses, and the destructive behavior of the disaffected stands to be impacted in a positive way.

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Where Do We Go From Here?

Demographic data may suggest that blacks are little better off today than a quarter century ago; but observation by longtime black residents suggests a general improvement in race relations. Closer examination shows much room for improvement:

- As in the past, there are two roads to equality:
 - Avenue "A" calls for assertive Advocacy. We must speak to the hopes, aspirations, and needs of the voiceless masses.
 - Avenue "B" calls for Supportive Programs which will sustain the disadvantaged, until the time comes they can sustain themselves.
- Let me make my most emphatic point: So long as we allow racism and other obstacles to clutter the path to equal opportunity, society will be burdened with the necessity of doing for others that which they could well do for themselves, given fair opportunities. Therefore, I am asking you all to continue down the roads to equality with the Urban League.
- Continue to support the Boys and Girls Club, and Girls, Inc., and Frances Nelson Health Center (FNHC) and the other agencies serving economically disadvantaged persons.
- I have invited the Chamber of Commerce to forge an alliance with the Urban League in two important employment ventures:

1. summer employment for youths who are not eligible for the JTPA Program.
 2. provide summer internships for local high school graduates with an eye toward careers here after college graduation. We can put a dent in the so-called "brain drain" and assure future leadership from among Urban League/Chamber scholars. We can start with, but not limit ourselves to the youngsters honored here tonight, as well as ten Parkland-Urban League scholars to be named later this spring through our Partners in Educational Progress initiative.
- Support "Job Connect 1994" which will provide summer jobs for young people 16 and older. Sherri Phillips at Regional Planning Commission (RPC), 328-3313, is coordinating this initiative.
 - Support "Project 18" which will serve young people all year around from birth to age 18. Mayor McCollum credits our A Better Community (ABC) vision as being the catalyst for "Project 18".
 - Black youths "doing right" far outnumber the "do wrong element." I call upon the freelance writers among our public school teachers to write commentary about the positive things black youths are doing in school. Is not praise yet one of the tools of motivation and learning?

- We in the black community have much that we must do ourselves. I call upon concerned African-Americans to get with the Urban League, Douglass Center, and the National Council of African-American Men (and Women) in a meeting of "Just-Us" to catalog problems and opportunities and propose strategies to combat the negative behaviors which are so detrimental to the well-being of our people and the towns we live in.
- In closing, I say thank you for helping me serve this community all of these years. Although the road often has been bumpy, it has been a good ride. I will soon get out of the "Catbird Seat" cognizant of the difficult road yet to travel, but buoyed by the knowledge that there are a goodly number of people of all races out there who want to help make Champaign County -- A BETTER COMMUNITY (ABC)

Thank you for your continued support -- moral and tangible.

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