

What a perfect response to a naïve question. Last week in New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin held a press conference to formally announce his 35% Disadvantaged Business Enterprise procurement goal for all City projects and contracts. He made the announcement at Baker Ready Mix which is a concrete plant owned by National Black Chamber of Commerce Board Member Arnold Baker. A Fox News reporter approached Arnold and asked the question "Why is the Mayor doing this? Can't Black business owners network their own way into business development without such affirmative action?" Without raising his voice or showing his anger Arnold simply said, "Here's the deal - your grandfather did not and would not play golf with my grandfather. In essence, this is why we are here today."

It is concise but is also so profound. It reminds me of my personal story which isn't much different than yours, depending on which generation you fall in. My grandfather was born and lived as a sharecropper. He did not network with whites business wise or personal. In fact, in Louisiana it was against the law and downright unhealthy if one would attempt. He never spent a day in school. His 10 children were obligated to work with him nine months a year. In the winter months of December, January and February (no crops to work) they were allowed to attend school. Three months a year and schooling stopped at the 8th grade. The nearest high school was 40 miles away in Shreveport and the tuition and boarding was totally prohibitive.

Such was the plight of my grandfather. The reporter's grandfather certainly played by different rules as the "sky" was the limit. Schools were public and access was certain. Her grandfather lived the American dream and everything his father had was passed onto him and his siblings. He had inheritance, land, networking infrastructures and other advantages that were very valuable to ensuring that the future would be bright. My grandfather's father was born a slave and like his son was illiterate and boxed in by a society and nation that treated him as a bona fide third class citizen. The contrasts are very enormous and the fact that the times have changed is a testament to the courage of the generation that came after my grandfather.

That next generation, my father, decided to make a difference. He took his 8th grade (3 months a year) education and moved to California during World War II and worked the docks of Ventura County which were bustling from the war effort. He later became a local truck driver while my mother was a domestic for whites whose fathers and grandfathers made big bucks owning gigantic farms and ranches in the Golden State. He was resolved to make a good living, buy land and demand public access at all levels for his children especially when it came to education. For this, there were multitudes of death threats. We woke up one morning at 4:00AM and there was a 10 foot burning cross in our front yard. He would often say "They have us up against the Pacific Ocean, all we can do now is fight". One of his proudest achievements was a Lifetime Membership in the NAACP. He was never really intimidated. I

guess the fact that his father would have been lynched for the positions my father fiercely stood up for and remained alive was true progress.

My grandfather didn't know what golf was and my father never dreamed of playing it. If they had, it would not have been a networking event and no whites or business brokers would be anywhere around to cut deals and make profitable plans. No, it was my generation that finally got to the golf course and that was very late in life. As we attempt to enter this capitalistic society for the first time in the history of this nation it is obvious that we are playing a very big game of "catch up". Our college degrees are fresh and our skills are newly learned. We enter Board Rooms as a groundbreaking event. Although we have been paying taxes since the Emancipation Proclamation, access to this economy has been extremely muted.

So now we go into the great system of Capitalism. We are neophytes to programs that exist through our oppression and unfair advantage benefiting those who really didn't deserve such. Don't think the field is level and nothing ever happened to make you on top. Affirmative Action is here to right the present wrongs that were built through exploitation and unfair rigging. The playing field is far from level.

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