

Searching for economic nourishment and food for the soul

One day, I was walking down the street in Williamsport when a white stretch limo pulled up along side of me. The window eased down to reveal a young Black man inside. He hollered, "Hey Brother, where can I find a soul food restaurant in this town?"

I yelled back, "There ain't none!" (Please forgive the idiomatic language. Sometimes I slip into the Black American English dialect of my youth, Ebonics.) As the car pulled away I noticed it had a Washington, DC license plate.

In the suburbs near our nation's capitol, African-Americans have done quite well climbing the economical ladder of success. The best and brightest were able to take advantage of the loosening of government's de facto racial discrimination policies to achieve middle class status. Black suburban communities became wealthier because Black government workers were allowed to compete for well-paying managerial and supervisory jobs. (A Black GS-14 government worker was guaranteed to get the same pay scale as his White counterpart.)

President Lyndon Johnson's pro-



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ouncement, "We shall overcome!" was not just political rhetoric. The private sector, nudged by Affirmative Action initiatives, adopted rigorous new hiring practices and the Black middle class was born. Black owned businesses were encouraged to participate in the larger marketplace. Black-owned car dealerships, Black financial brokers, Black law firms, Black advertising agencies and Black franchises of every stripe sprang up to compete for the new Black wealth.

But, the progress of the Civil Rights Era seems to have passed by Williamsport.

A longtime resident told me that Williamsport had, at one time, a vibrant Black business class. Blacks owned restaurants, and other businesses. There was even a Black owned hotel! But with the death of racial segregation across the country, Blacks were suddenly allowed

to eat, shop and stay anywhere they wanted. "Blacks-only" businesses soon lost their loyal customers to the nicer White establishments. When I asked the resident what happened to the Black hotel owners, she said, "They moved away."

Today, there is a dearth of Black owned businesses in Williamsport's Black community. If you look closely you will find a handful of barber shops and beauty salons and little else. (Black hair emporiums have managed to survive because Whites couldn't compete with the undisputed experts of Black hair care.)

Williamsport's Black-owned businesses now include a Caribbean-styled restaurant (closed), a couple of variety stores, a car wash, and a few assorted "odds-and-ends" such as a freelance musicians, tradespersons and mechanics. Williamsport's Black business community is anemic.

After the encounter on the street, I asked myself, "What would it take to establish a "soul-food eatery" in Williamsport?" To be sure, we have plenty of excellent cooks and some have actually "catered" private affairs and events

in the Black community.

And that is the problem; a great deal of the Black entrepreneurial spirit resides in the underground economy. Unseen by tax accounts and government regulators there are hustlers that sell everything from clothing to bootleg videos. And of course there are the drug dealers and other purveyors of illegal activities that add to the unrecorded economy of an impoverished community.

A pastor of a local Black church told me that there were many "healthy" Black businesses in Williamsport. He said, "But most weren't legal".

To reach true economic parity, African-Americans must establish a healthy business class. Old modes of thinking need to be replaced. Black businesses should NOT be "for Blacks only" businesses. (Greek restaurants are not just for Greeks, Italian restaurants are not just for Italians, and Chinese restaurants are not just for Chinese.)

I envision a restaurant chain like the Olive Garden or Applebee's that is based on African-American cooking. I see a franchise that is primarily operated by a Black

owned corporation. I see waiters and waitresses serving collard greens, black eye peas and cornbread. I dream of a menu that would reflect the preferences of the African-American palate.

And it could begin right here in Williamsport! All we need to do is "think outside the box".

More Black businesses will mean more jobs in the Black community. More jobs will mean more home ownership. More home ownership will mean more accumulation of real wealth that would be passed on to the next generation.

In short, the Black community must be less dependent on the White community. But to become self-sufficient and independent the Black community must share a common purpose, organize and coordinate its efforts among its individual organizations.

The world is waiting...

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