

COMMENTARY

Number 673 is Special

By Harry C. Alford, Columnist

It was November 19, another Saturday night in Chicago, Illinois. That means one thing is certain. People will be murdered. It goes without saying. Chicago is one of the most fatalistic cities in our nation. A city that has some of the strictest gun possession laws but that doesn't matter to "Chi-Town". From sundown Friday to sunrise Monday there will be dozens of assaults leading to murder, manslaughter and miscellaneous savagery.

During the evening of November 19, murder number 673 will occur. It is so cold to frame it this way. To the family and friends of number 673 it will be a devastation. The family and friends of number 673 will be in every regional newspaper in the nation, not just Chicago. Jovan Wilson is the name of this victim. Jovan, a 15-year-old, happens to be the grandson of the Honorable Danny Davis. Danny is the US Congressman for Chicago's 7th Congressional District. In Chicago and Washington, DC Danny is known as a very distinguished leader and well known to millions – including me and my family.

This is the nightmare that every Black family fears. Your Black teenage child out at night where he could be in danger like an antelope grazing the Masai Mara Plains in Kenya. Danger is around and it can be lethal. This wasn't your typical homicide. Jovan was arguing with two acquaintances over the possession of pants and tennis shoes. One thing led to another and fists were swinging and in the end a pistol came out and fired. So now Jovan is dead and two others may be spending the rest of their lives in prison. A tragedy for all involved. May God bless the three families especially the Davis family. Danny is such a caring leader and I know this is taking a very heavy toll on this compassionate person.

Not too long ago, Illinois State Senator Mattie Hunter, experienced a similar tragedy with her two nephews. They were out in Chicago on a Saturday night and were murdered. Is anyone exempt in Chicago and other urban areas throughout our nation? No, there is no guarantee for any of our families. When our leaders' families can suffer the same way as any of us can then it is time to come together and say "Stop the violence!" Even police officers become targets.

It seems like common sense should help control this matter. But no that doesn't work. Making guns illegal will not work either. Like I said earlier there is something very mysterious about this issue. It is some kind of selection process. One human being has no regard for others and



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will instantly kill another mother's child. How do we get so evil and callous? As the great songwriter, Maurice White, would say: "A child is born with a heart of gold, the ways of the world will turn that heart stone cold".

Our churches and clergy should step up a little higher in preaching the gospel. Our school teachers and administrators must demand discipline amongst the students they oversee. Our police must be wise and prudent as they protect the "peace" in our communities and citizens. Our courts must have the wisdom of "Solomon" as they apply the law equally and for the benefit of all. Finally, our parents must give love and guidance for their children and grandchildren. There is no doubt in my mind that the Davis family provided such love and guidance. It appears impossible to uphold a smooth and abiding societal process; as simple as it sounds in the Ten Commandments. But somehow we collectively disregard the rule of God's law. My goodness people our Creator knew what he was doing when he had Moses deliver it to us.

Maybe this time we get serious. I mean more than reading at church next Sunday and then go spend the rest of the week absent of what you pledged on Sunday (do you?). There is just too much hate. We are too quick to throw pain at someone and too heartless to help another human being who may be hurt. May Chicago's number 673 be more than just a sad statistic. He was a child of God and it would be such a shame if we just walk on as if nothing happened. Right now, let's all give a deep prayer for the Davis family.

These things don't have to happen if we begin to live "Pure of Heart".

Mr. Alford is the co-founder, President/CEO, of the National Black Chamber of Commerce®. Website: www.nationalbcc.org Email: halford@nationalbcc.org

Lawsuit Against School Choice Scholarships Puts Children At Risk

Dr. Angela Kennedy

As an educator for Orange County Public Schools for 13 years, I saw too many children falling through the cracks and becoming left behind. As a result of this sad occurrence of events and of my resolve to no longer stand idle, I decided to establish Deeper Root Academy.

DRA's genesis began in my home with three students – a modern version of the one-room school house. In less than three years, DRA continues to blossom into a sanctuary nurturing 78 students from Pre-K-8 within its branches. Within DRA's boughs, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a school choice program for low-income students, provides funding to 36 students.

At Deeper Root, our classes are made smaller in an effort to give students more individualized attention. We are not bound by state-mandated restrictions nor do we follow cookie-cutter models. As a result, we don't funnel kids down the same path. Instead, we recognize that as all student are different, they also learn differently. We focus on building relationships ... deepening roots. Attention to the student and encouragement are sown and trust is abundantly reaped. Once a child trusts, they learn. Once they taste success, they become both empowered and unstoppable.

A faith-based atmosphere at Deeper Root is also a part of the Deeper Root difference. I chose to start a private school rather than a public charter school because I wanted my students to learn Biblical principles that I either found watered down or altogether missing from the public sector. These principles are vital as it's important that our children become good citizens ... to know what it means to be trustworthy, respectful, and responsible. It's important that our students are not just taught but they are shown. Our students know our slogan: "Knowing what's right doesn't mean much, unless you do what's right."

Many of the students at DRA arrived at least one grade level behind in the public



Angela Kennedy

schools. Now, they are budding with confidence and achievement; these students are succeeding.

Despite the rich environment into which these students have been planted, these tender shoots have recently come under risk ... the risk of a harsh sun and an unrelenting wind. This change in environment comes in the form of a lawsuit.

The ability of the parent to enroll their child in a school of their choice, one that benefits the child, could be taken away because of this lawsuit. A lawsuit that is still unknown by many.

Two years ago, the Florida teachers union, the NAACP and others filed the suit against the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. The first two courts that heard the case dismissed it, stating the plaintiffs could not prove their claims of harm to public schools. But the union continues to appeal, most recently to the Florida Supreme Court. The scholarship parents who are defending the program filed their response last week.

The stakes could not be higher. The scholarship program is serving 95,000 students statewide with 9,000 residing in Orange County. Greater than 70 percent

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Lawsuit to Kill Scholarship Program Will Hurt Pine Hills

By Latrina Peters-Gipson

Saint Andrew Catholic School in the Pine Hills neighborhood was on the verge of closure a few years ago. The neighborhood had changed dramatically over time, and the school lost its connection with the community. Though parents wanted educational alternatives, they viewed the school as unaffordable.

The educators and leaders of Saint Andrew rallied and worked to become part of the community again. With the help of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, we proved to the parents of Pine Hills that a private education was indeed within their reach. Our school started to grow again, and more importantly, the parents had an option that worked for their children.

Now all of that is in jeopardy because of a lawsuit.

Filed in 2014 by the Florida Education Association and Florida NAACP, the suit seeks to uproot nearly 96,000 students throughout Florida, including 9,000 in Orange County. Nearly 70 percent of the students are black or brown and more than half live in single-parent homes. Their average family income is \$24,000 a year, barely above the poverty line.

Even though two courts ruled against them, the plaintiffs keep appealing, most recently to the Florida Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the scholarship parents are afraid.

The lawsuit is a disservice to the parents of Pine Hills who work hard to provide a better life for their kids.

When they heard about a lawsuit that might take their scholarships away, they were upset. Parents came to me in tears, afraid for what the future might hold for their children. Many of them came to us



Latrina Peters-Gipson

because their children were not doing well in their previous schools. Now they had a school where their child was succeeding. What would happen if that opportunity went away?

Pine Hills has the highest concentration of scholarship students in the state. Parents are choosing for a reason, but has anyone at the FEA or NAACP taken time to learn why?

I think the lawsuit is a result of misunderstanding regarding the scholarship program and the schools that participate.

Contrary to the myths, Saint Andrew is an accredited school, with certified teachers. We have staff and volunteers that speak many languages, including Spanish, Creole, and Vietnamese to cater to our diverse population. We teach Math and Science and we do it according to state standards.

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of these students are minorities with an average family income of \$24,000 annually. Test scores revealed that the typical scholarship student was struggling in his or her prior school but is now making steady progress. In other words, the scholarship has been an opportunity for disadvantaged children, a light at the end of tunnel, and a welcomed sunrise to a long and dark night. These students are making the most of this gift.

So many of our students were discouraged with their previous learning environment. So were their parents. The system wasn't working for them. They were failing, acting out, and distancing themselves from that which appeared unattainable. If the pattern were to continue, many of these students would be destined to become another statistic of the public school system ... dropouts.

My wish is for the teachers union and NAACP to do what is right for the children, for our future. The lawsuit is unfair and misguided, possessing the potential to devastate many lives. It could also be a precedent to ending other programs that focus on providing services to our most

vulnerable students.

Thirteen students at Deeper Root Academy use state scholarship funds purposed for students with disabilities. There is nothing to stop the opponents of tax credit scholarships from targeting these programs next. They could also go after VPK, which similarly allows parents to send their children to private schools. Although we don't have VPK students, I know many schools that do, and many parents who depend on those scholarships.

The opposition's main argument is that the tax credit scholarship is draining money from public schools. This claim is unsubstantiated as multiple studies show the contrary. So what is this really about?

I believe it's about politics and about misplaced values. It should be about the children. Maybe the best learning environment for a particular child is a public school. Maybe it is a private school. What does it matter? What matters is whether the child is learning and succeeding.

Please, let's get back to what matters.

Dr. Angela Kennedy is founder and CEO of Deeper Root Academy.

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Yes, faith is an important component of our education, but we are inclusive and only 10 percent of our students are Catholic. We teach students that "God is in all relationships," but we also teach the Big Bang. We also set lofty goals for our students. After all, our motto is "College and Heaven." The faith, lofty goals, and strong academics create a learning community with few disruptions and more time for students to focus. The structure we provide keeps kids from going down the wrong path.

This is what the parents of Pine Hills want for their children. It is why we've gone from nearly closing a few years ago to 344 students today. Of those, 295 use the scholarship.

I think the people behind the lawsuit also misunderstand our parents. I'm not sure the teacher's union or NAACP has taken the time to understand what they want

for their children and why. We took the time, and now we thrive because our students succeed.

As an educator, I know how much the educational landscape has changed to become more diverse and accommodating to students with different needs. The FEA and NAACP are trying to resist something they cannot stop. The definition of public education no longer means children are zoned to neighborhood schools. It means choices for parents and students alike.

But choices can't be just for the rich.

That is why the scholarship exists. It ensures equity and equality for those of lesser means. If the FEA and NAACP want to help low-income communities, they need to listen to them, not try to take away opportunities.

Latrina Peters-Gipson is principal of Saint Andrew Catholic School and a 20-year veteran in education.

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