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Creating an Air of Expectancy

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It's an awesome sight to watch 500 young Black men, exceptionally talented young men graduate from college, moving from the distinction of being men of Morehouse to Morehouse Men. I proudly watched my son, Kishon, and the sons of others accept their degrees this past weekend.

It was just icing on the cake when I heard my son's name called followed by the words "Cum Laude," denoting that he had distinguished himself as a student graduating with honors. But, what struck me most while in Atlanta was the mother of a child from one of the city's roughest areas who had sought me out. She called me and said she had to see me.

With over 14 guests in tow I didn't know when I would get a moment to see her. She called my son while we were on our way to dinner and asked if she could stop by. He directed her to the restaurant. Well, to make a long story short, this lady wanted to let me know in person how much an impact my son had made upon her child who Kishon had been tutoring every weekend during his entire four years at Morehouse. She was so proud of the progress her son had made, especially in math, and how he wanted to be like Kishon and go to college. Now Atlanta's hood is no piece of cake. My first thoughts were, "My kid did what?" You know that parent cautionary instinct kind of thing running through your mind. Then it dawned upon me. He did that because that's what we've always talked about in our house. That's been the business we've been in and here was my kid doing it. I thought, "Damn. Your kids actually do listen to you." Moreover, to have this proud mother so persistent to let me know my kid had made a difference in the life of her family brought tears my eyes. I can't describe how good that felt and how proud I was of him.

Another thing I noticed about these young Black college graduates was that most had had something lined up. They either were going to law, or medical school, or some other graduate programs, or they had a job lined up. Bells went off in my head... It's not rocket science - a good education gives you the keys to life's door of opportunities. Nothing plays a larger role in elevating the quality of our lives than the role education plays. It begs the question. If we know the recipe for making success, why aren't we producing more Black youngsters with the motivation and ability to go on to college, particularly young men?

I think that's the challenge for Black leaders in south Florida. Rather than threatening a boycott over FCAT testing, our churches, civic organizations and politicians ought to be about the business of devising strategies to enrich, motivate and prepare our children to meet the rigors of testing, to improve their performance and, most of all, find constructive ways to support those youngsters who have fallen behind in reading, writing and math skills. I was amazed at the number of educational pundits and others whom I talked to who disagreed with the recent stance taken by Bishop Victor Curry, of Miami's New Birth

Baptist Church calling for a statewide boycott if Governor Bush doesn't reassess the impact of the FCAT exam on minority children. And despite having some Black political support in Miami, a number of Black legislators were caught off guard by Curry's threat to lead a statewide boycott over FCAT. In fact, most agree that while FCAT has some shortcomings and doesn't entirely address years of educational apartheid, we must be about the business of having and setting a standard of achievement if more of our youngsters are to compete and succeed in this world.

Few of us can truly feel comfortable with kids coming out of high school unable to read, write or count. For God's sake, we all know where that leads. Nowhere! And at that point - nobody's going to care. Progress is painful but in a state that ranks somewhere near the bottom, around 49, we're not going to get where we need to go by adhering to the status quo of years gone by. Nor can we turn it into a political debate. The debate is about what's best for our children. I've seen in a microcosm of 500 young men the embodiment of the words of the late Morehouse College president, Benjamin Mays, that might serve to guide us all.

"There is an air of expectancy at Morehouse College," he said. "It is expected that the student who enters here will do well. It is also expected that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse graduate, he will do exceptionally well. We expect nothing less... May you perform so well that when a man is needed for an important job in your field, your work will be so impressive that the committee of selection will be compelled to examine your credentials. May you forever stand for something noble and high. Let no man dismiss you with a wave of the hand or a shrug of the shoulder..." Those are words that surely can apply to the greater Black community. We need to expect and help our youngsters do well.