

Harambee presses on for 25 years

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once gave an important insight in regard to achievement.

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

Thus is the story of Harambee as it celebrates 25 years of outreach to African-American youth and their leaders.

Struggle and tireless exertion regarding how to provide spiritual and cultural formation has marked the Harambee ministry. It is reminiscent of how fugitive slaves scaled mountains, forded creeks and threaded the forests. They came across the Ohio River and yes the Chesapeake Bay with ailing women and sick children. Sometimes softly and imperiously they rapped on windows and begged for help: a piece of bread, a spoon of medicine, directions to the next town. Whenever we rapped, whenever we stopped, our parents’ parents had to make a decision either for or against slavery. Like this scenario, Harambee kept moving forward in spite of limited resources and challenges pressed upon the ministry.

This endurance to survive and serve comes out of a history of perseverance. When World War II began, black America found itself rigidly segregated with little hope of dismantling the system of apartheid under which it was suffering. In their second bout in 1934, Joe Louis beat Max Schmeling, and the Baltimore Afro reported that Pennsylvania Avenue went wild with glee. Baltimore and black America at large had little else to celebrate. But no matter how much the brown bomber contributed to making the world safe for democracy, he had to do so in a segregated army.

Lena Horne was asked to do an armed forces tour to entertain the troops. At one of the bases, as she sang, eyewitnesses report she moved smoothly away from the white troops, past the German officers who were POW’s until she was in front of the “colored” section, whereupon she stopped, turned her back on the rest of the soldiers and sang only to her own. The rest of her tour was canceled, and she never

sang for the American armed forces again. Whenever we rapped, whenever we stopped, our parents' parents had to make a decision either for or against of pressing forward.

In pressing forward we evaluate what is necessary to move God's young people to a higher level of spiritual formation and cultural pride. Janice Hale Benson, a leading African-American educator, states that black children succeed when they are mentored and supported by black mentors.

What don't we know about the hardships facing our youth in this city and in this archdiocese? Our young people will only learn what we teach them. No status quo is warranted here! An urgency to teach and share in ways best understood, that factors the reality and culture of our children is necessary? Are we waiting for someone other than ourselves to direct us? Do we need permission to pass go and collect \$200? Our young people are precious, and they deserve the very best ... "I believe our children are the future teach them well and they will"

Over the years, Harambee has accomplished much despite barriers. One could argue that the organization has exceeded goals consistent with the pastoral letter on evangelization from our black shepherds of the United States (What We Have Seen and Heard), to integrate the cultural, educational, social and spiritual dimensions of youth ministry into the lives of African-American youth, either through their parish youth group, school or community. Certainly the program's foundress, Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Gwynette Proctor, knew that however long the network survived it would not achieve any semblance of success without the willingness on the part of the many dedicated volunteer youth ministers, adult contacts and young people to "work together." Our yearlong celebration begins with a St. Cecilia's sponsored Youth Prayer Breakfast on Nov. 28, followed by a host of enrichment gatherings at parishes throughout the city. In February 2010, a youth liturgy will be celebrated at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Baltimore, by Bishop Denis J. Madden and pastors of Harambee-affiliated parishes. All are welcome.

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