

Breaking The Chains of Ignorance

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Every Tuesday evening, in the basement down a dimly lit hall in Pilot City Neighborhood Services, the African American Men Project has hosted one of its best-kept secrets -- Black Men Reading.

For the past eight months, the weekly book club has been meeting to not only embrace Black literature, but also Black history, love and wealth. The evening, facilitated by African American Men Project commissioners and University of Minnesota Teaching Specialist Ezra Hyland, also addresses a critical issue in the African American community -- literacy and the appreciation of it.

With attendance ranging from five to as many as 50, there is no such thing as a typical evening, although Hyland said he tends to begin each night with about 15 or 20 minutes of a video showing a significant Black figure.

"Modeling is important," he said. "We want them to see a Malcolm X or a Na'im Akbar. So if you can't read, you can see the power of language and literacy in their lives." Afterwards, there is a general discussion, possibly something from the daily newspaper, "just to get people warmed up," followed by a discussion specifically related to the text the group is reading.

Hyland also explained that the importance of the book club is not just about reading, but about changing perceptions. "One of the dominant themes in Black literature," reported Hyland, "has been its association with literacy and freedom. Through control of information, White people have been able to control Black people."

Hyland continued, "In this dismal state of Black literacy [one in five can't read], our culture has been hijacked in a lot of ways, so that today many young children think to be book smart is White; to be intellectual is to be soft.

In this culture, this American society, Black people have been lied about, lied on and lied to so much that, many times, we do not know what to believe about ourselves. We don't know what is true and what is not true. The importance of Black Men Reading is that it is going to give us a chance to correct some of these misconceptions."

In a situation where 20 percent of the members may not be able to read, Hyland said, "Being part of a discussion where these ideas are expressed is very important. It inspires them to develop and deal with their issues. No human being wants to be ignorant. The typical expression is, 'I never knew that. I never heard that.'

"These young men, and women, are seeing themselves in ways they have never seen before. Rather than being discussed as a problem, they see it at a possibility, as potential. When they come to Black Men Reading, they see how others have dealt with their life situations. They see themselves reflected."

In one Black Men Reading session, Hyland discussed the importance of W.E.B. Dubois and the historic relevance of Dubois' classic text *The Souls of Black Folk*. Hyland reported the many misgivings scholars had toward Dubois' philosophy of a talented tenth, citing it as elitist, and showing how the philosophy impacts African Americans today.

In another session, guest speaker Verna Cornelia Simmons, author of *Power of People*, discussed with attendees the four types of people who use four powerful ways to either positively or negatively influence your life. The group discovered how "Adders" and "Multipliers" can put individuals on the road to personal success, and they learned about ways to deal with "Subtracters" and "Dividers" who offer a negative influence.

Thornton Jones, AAMP program developer, said, "Black Men Reading is also about personal enrichment. The more youths [and communities] know about their culture, the greater their self-esteem. That's what we talk about at Black Men Reading. Let them see that we come from kings and queens. Education is key. We need to know and share that with our youths."

Referring back to the idea of modeling, Hyland discussed the fact that children are actors. "Dr. Juwanza Kunjufu (activist and author of several books, including *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys I and II*) talks about how children imitate what they hear, not just what they see. Every time we see a child with a ball, we say he's going to be the next Michael Jordan. Every time we see that same child with books, we talk about how difficult learning and homework are. If we can see Black men with books, learning and teaching, then it will give those children permission to do the same," he said.

"We have to create a place where the images we want and need to see are being nurtured," said Hyland. "To me, two or three men discussing a book is as powerful an image as 10 young Black men running up and down a basketball court."

If you have never been to a Black Men Reading session and want more information, Hyland said, "The first thing you need to do is show up." Otherwise, call 612-302-4692, or the AAMP hotline at 612-302-4694. Black Men Reading, beginning Wednesday, January 7, meets every Wednesday, 6 to 8 pm, at Pilot City Health Center, located at 1313 Penn Ave. N. (Please note the change in day and location).