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Higher Education: Putting Our Children on the Bus to Success

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by Angela Mae Kupenda



Professor Angela Mae Kupenda

To protect our Black youth and other youth of color given the many incidents still occurring today, many responses are necessary, including: nonviolent protests, demands for legal and justice reform, instructing our youth on the realities of racism in America, and law suits for the injuries from state sanctioned and private racialized violence. While all of these, and more, are needed, we must not lose sight of the offense that is also called for.

The former slave and later human rights advocate and orator Frederick Douglass had it right when he discovered that education was a way out of slavery. And, higher education is a way out of the continued slavery-like oppressions and disregards Blacks and others in America have long endured. My mother had this insight as she struggled as a single parent to help all of her children, and other children in the community, to obtain their college degrees, get gainful employment, and to continue to help others do the same. She would say that she did not have land to leave to us or other wealth, and that our education would not make all the White folks we encounter, even at work, treat us right, but higher education could help us improve our lives and improve the lives of others.

My mother had to use a wheelchair for many of her later years in her seventies. Although she got out of the house often, she did spend many days at home. People would ask her what she did all day. Her first response would be, “I work on my spiritual life, I do my stretching exercises, cook, visit and counsel others by phone, and write my book.” But then she would add, with a twinkle in her eyes, “But my most important job is this: I put my children on the bus to success, and when they try to hop off, I run up beside the bus and push them back on.”

Thus even in the midst of the institutional and some intentional racism that we still are confronting as Blacks in America, I urge us to also focus on this offense strategy for the future. Let’s reinvigorate our

efforts in putting our children on the bus to success, and when they try to hop off, run up beside the bus and push them back on. My mother's saying is full with wisdom even for today.

My mother argued we must "put" our children on the bus to success. In the Black community it seems we have a culture of individual coming of age and self-determination. We seem to resist being "helicopter parents" constantly hovering over our children and their environments, cheating them of their personal growth. While treasuring our rich culture, we still must "put" them on the bus to success. This requires pointed action and, as always, a need to protect the self-pride that some others in the world may try to deny our youth.

A young woman in our extended family was preparing to go to college. The historically Black college and university (HBCU) in the city was clearly her best choice, financially and otherwise. The young woman, though, was receiving many letters from predominantly White colleges inviting her to apply, but with no promises of financial support. When we asked her why she was not considering the HBCU, her response was that they were not "courting" her at all. That next morning, my mother called the HBCU's admissions office, told them about her young relative and asked them to please send her a letter inviting her to apply and telling her about their available scholarships and financial aid. They gladly did. The young woman felt important and was ecstatic. She never knew that she had been "put" on the bus to success. She applied, did well and graduated. She is now a college educator.

Note: this is not a limousine to success; it is not a taxi to success, nor a jet plane, nor a midnight train, to success. It is a bus. A bus can be slow in getting one to the destination. A bus may seem not high class to some, especially folks in the hot south where traveling by auto is preferred. A bus ride is bumpy. A bus may not take one on a direct route; one may have to transfer buses. The bus requires one to get up early, to endure rain and heat, to walk a distance to get to the bus stop. Riding a bus is often not easy. My mother's point is put your child on this path to success, this bus, because it is headed to success even if it is rugged and not direct. Our children may not finish college in four years, it might take longer. Our children may have to get another degree to acquire the gainful employment they desire. All of this is acceptable as long as we can keep them on the bus to success.

My mother did not say get on the bus with them, but put them on it. The bus is also carrying other passengers. On this journey, they may find other people to help encourage them who are also journeying on this bus seeking success. A young man in my extended family was trying to go to college, but had waited late to apply. My mother exhorted several of us to help him. Another relative worked at the university and knew the departments and names of people he needed to talk with, but did not have the time to walk all over the campus taking him to these people. But I did that summer. Each person he met got him one step closer to enrollment. Toward the end of the day, we stopped by the Honors College to visit the legendary head of that program. She gave him the biggest boost when she challenged his laziness and told him to cut yards or work all summer laboring with his hands and back. Then in the fall to labor with his mind and focus 100 percent on his studies and that she would be watching him. That young man is now an educator.

Our work is not done though once we put our children on the bus to success. Inevitably, they will try to hop off. They may hop off as they get impatient with the slow progress, they may think they see something

more enticing that is off the bus to success, bad relationship choices may make them want to hop off, short-term failures may make them want to hop off, fear may make them want to hop off, seeing all the isms (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) may make them despair and want to get off, not paying good attention they may think “they have arrived already” and try to hop off way too early before their stop. They will inevitably try to hop off.

My mother said, “And, when they try to hop off, I run up beside the bus and push them back on.” I don’t believe this is being an annoying helicopter parent. I think this is being an exceptionally good Black parent who understands the dangers and distractions that will entice children to hop off the bus to success. This means we must be alert and understanding of the things our young people face on this bus, and those things lurking for them off the bus to success. We must also stay in our best spiritual, mental and physical shape so we can get up beside the bus. When we get there, we must not get on the bus, as this is their bus to success. But we should “push them back on.” We must push them back on with our encouragement, wise instruction, sharing from our own mistakes, understanding, humility and all the strength we can muster, and all our love, even when our children get upset at what we have to say, as we speak the truth in love.

Professor Kupenda is a professor at the Mississippi College School of Law in Jackson. She is a summa cum laude graduate of Jackson State University in Mississippi and holds a master’s degree from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Kupenda finished first in her class at the Mississippi College School of Law.

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