Résumé Stories: Lenora Fulani
from *American Behind the Color Line*
Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

> Political activist and educator Lenora Fulani teaches kids how to be successful in the business world. Her premise is that the workplace is a performance space, the world is a theater, and our kids have to learn how to perform. "A lot of performances black kids currently have, they think of as the essence of themselves as black people," she told me. "But they can learn a different way to perform, like they learn anything else. Because of the poverty they live in, what the kids know about the world is very narrow, and they know it from the street corner. Part of what it means to learn is that you have to be worldly in ways that a lot of our kids aren't. So our educational approach puts them in situations where they have to learn to be more sophisticated."

I grew up in Chester, Pennsylvania, a poor suburb of Philadelphia. It was very much a working class town. Many people who live in Chester came up from down South and settled there because it had a lot of industry at one time. My father worked as a baggage carrier for the Pennsylvania Railroad. My grandfather used to work in the steel mill. My uncles worked for a linoleum company and for the Scott Paper Company. Chester was predominantly black and poor, and still is.

My father died when I was twelve, and my mother kept us going. She was my principal role model, which is interesting because she was working class and pretty much uneducated until she became a nurse. I think people don't see themselves as possible role models, but my mother was quite something. She's one of my heroes. Having worked as a domestic until she was around thirty-five years old, she decided to become a licensed practical nurse and did that until she retired. She had to drop out of school in the sixth grade, and she was always very ashamed of that because she couldn't spell. She would write me letters and apologize for her spelling in the midst of them. But she was a real go-getter.

I knew that my nephews and nieces were poor even when I was little. One of my sister's kids used to come to our house and eat nonstop. All the things that happen to people in poor families happened in mine. But I wasn't particularly self- conscious about our circumstances. I didn't walk around thinking, I am poor. Being the youngest in my family, I got everything they had to offer. My closest sister was eight years older than me. It was almost like being an only child.

I was aware that I had privileges my siblings didn't have, and I spent part of my childhood trying to be giving to people. That was always very important to me. I used to play the piano for youth choir in our church, from the time I was twelve until I left to attend undergraduate school. My mother had bought me a piano. She rented it for a year, and when she realized I was going to keep playing it, she began to pay for it. She used to do things that were pretty huge for us.

One of the reasons I feel so close to black communities and black kids is I think it was a miracle that I got out of Chester as a young woman not pregnant. I watched what happened to my sisters and cousins and I was scared to death. I was like, I don't want this to happen to me. But that wasn't because I was brilliant. Circumstances impacted me; I learned from things I saw. It was almost a miracle. People always say to me, there's something about you that made you different. I think a lot of what made me different was outside of my control, such as being the last kid of five. Many circumstances go into the choices people make.

By the time I left high school, I knew things were not going well for many of those around me. I made a list of all the people I was going to go back to Chester and save after I got my degree. When I really discovered that I too was poor, I was in therapy. I was in my late twenties and had separated from my husband. I was in graduate school, studying psychology. My husband and I broke up when my kids were five years old and two and a half. Because he tied his fatherhood to our marriage, I think he just disappeared when he recognized that I had really left the marriage.

I had my two kids. My mother used to always tell us that we should have a savings account. So every time I got paid, I would put money in the savings account. But by the end of the month I would have to take it out to spend it, and I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't have a savings account. I finally raised it as an issue in therapy and my therapist said to me, do you know that you're poor? And I felt two things almost simultaneously: totally humiliated and extremely relieved. I felt like, I don't have enough money to have a savings account; this is not a character flaw. It was magnificent; it was liberating. I was working with a white Jewish therapist whom I'd also worked with politically. His name is Dr. Fred Newman. He's been a mentor, and we've worked together now in the All Stars Project for more than twenty years.

I was not raised to think I could become anything I wanted to be, or that I would end up with a Ph.D. My family was almost completely nonacademic. I'm the first person in my immediate family who went to college. I don't know if I ever saw my father read a book. I assume my mother read some, because she had to pass tests to become an LPN. My parents bought me *The World Book Encyclopedia,* with the red covers. I think that if I had just completed high school it would have been fine with them. In some ways, what I've done with my life is incomprehensible to my family.

Two of my sisters work – one is a nurse, and another works for the post office. A third sister died when I was fifteen. My brother worked for the Ford Motor Company in Chester and followed the job when the company moved to Mahwah, New Jersey. He finished his career and retired, and lives in New Jersey now.

Kids in the inner city today are just as poor as those of us were who grew up poor in small towns in the 1950s. In some ways, they're poorer. Inner-city poverty has a particular look to it. It's become so chronic that the poor accept it as a way of life, as do people who aren't so poor. We grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. There was a sense of having someplace to go. Growth was possible. The *Brown* v. *Board of Education* ruling, in 1954, paved the way for increased opportunity for us. More funding became

available to state colleges. Individuals were bringing cases against state schools saying they had to admit black students because the colleges were paid for by tax dollars. In the 1950s and 1960s, Historically Black Colleges and Universities were supporting black kids who got into college by offering them the secondary-level preparation they had missed because the schools they attended were so inadequate. All this had a huge impact on me and on many others who grew up at that time. And the HBCU became even more important in the 1970s and 1980s, with the tremendous increase in the number of blacks attending college in those years.

Unless they have huge fantasies about being the next P. Diddy or Michael Jordan, a lot of kids living in poverty today think their kids are going to be poor and their grandkids are going to be poor. Kids in the inner city lead blind and uneventful lives. They're filled with all the rage and anger and non-developmental displays that go on in poor communities. People fight and scream and turn to sex at thirteen or fourteen because that's what there is to do. One of the reasons I got out of Chester is I remember sitting on my porch and looking at the three cars that went down my street every other hour. Being bored is so overwhelming. To me, it was one of the worst experiences of my life.

The growing economic gap between the rich and the poor has real consequences in our community. Many of our people haven't gotten richer and more economically stable since the 1960s, even though we've produced a black middle class. I don't know if the class divide in the black community is permanent, but I would like for us to acknowledge it more. I have a strong reaction to affluent black people commenting on this country's current economic conditions as if they themselves are impacted in the same ways that the black poor are. When they say things like we're all a paycheck away from being poor, it's not true. It's a way of denying both the benefits of the Civil Rights Movement and the fact that there is a big grouping of black people who are dirt poor. We're not all the same, and saying we're all just a paycheck away from poverty only masks the differences.

Legal freedom from racism has had a true impact. The Civil Rights Movement has raised new challenges and new responsibilities, choices like do I go to class, do I do my homework, do I not get pregnant, do I not do drugs. That sort of choice in some ways is a very personal decision, and in other ways it's not. The poverty in our communities today is chronic in part because young people do not have the sense of possibility we had in the 1960s. What's not working for the black community and poor blacks today is more subtle than it was then, when people were fighting to change the world for us and there was a sense that all of this poverty wasn't our fault. Today there is more of an effort to blame the victim. It's almost like kids who are poor and failing are told, you have all of this available; how can you not take advantage of it? But in many ways they don't have all of it available. They don't have access. I think the educational institutions in our cities are failing. They have failed the kids for a host of reasons, and the kids are bewildered.

Since the 1960s, too much emphasis has been placed on economic deprivation and not enough on recognizing that we live in a country where it's about superiority and inferiority. The white experience is seen as superior, the black experience as inferior, and most American institutions were developed for the superior people. Even things that have nothing to do with racial issues are seen in black and white. There is a sense in our

communities that there is black behavior and there is white behavior. You can rant and rave about that and say down with the system, which I understand. But in a way that misses the point. That's how things are. The schools were not created for all the kids who go there.

I think they were created for white kids in the 1890s, different sets of white kids who could function in particular ways. And one consequence of creating a pedagogy for white people, for the superior people, is that it doesn't work with the people who have been labeled inferior. White kids have a very different view of the world and a very different life experience than young black and Latino kids. White kids are insiders. They view themselves as insiders; they're connected to the American mainstream. The approach in poor communities is remedial. The statement and posture are that there's something wrong with you; you have to catch up. Our kids feel like outsiders because they are, and you have to deal with that.

When I think of who it is that has to take some responsibility for the failure in our community, I think of the black establishment, the people who have benefited from the Civil Rights Movement. Many activists in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s recognized this hierarchical arrangement in our society, in our schools, in our institutions. The problem is that they were nationalists; they used identity politics. I think they looked at black culture, poor black culture, and defended it on face value. They talked about it as being economically deprived but culturally rich, and I think that was a mistake. I understand what they tried to do. But I think we made a major mistake in saying that we were culturally different as opposed to culturally deprived, because being culturally different covered over the fact that we were culturally deprived.

In 1968 there was a fight in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville section of Brooklyn over local control of the schools. The mission of the coalition that led the fight was to educate our kids. But my God, at that point in 1968, the young people in the black community were two grades down in terms of reading scores, and they lived in mostly segregated communities. Nearly thirty-five years later, they're in segregated communities, almost overwhelmingly, and I think there was a test that showed black kids in eighth-grade English performing at 24 percent of their grade requirement compared to 57 percent of whites.

We have to deal with this, but we also have to take responsibility for it, because while the mission was to educate our kids, that movement failed. The failure has to do in part with an economic situation that hasn't changed dramatically. But some of it has to do with the fact that a lot of the activists and militants who participated in Ocean Hill–Brownsville got absorbed in the bureaucracies of the Democratic Party. They either lost a sense of the mission or they didn't have the political or conceptual tools to produce quality education. I think their efforts to solve the problem of under-education in our communities, or mis-education, with nationalist identity politics devastated our community, and mis-educated us.

In the 1960s our political movements were geared toward establishing equality in the sharing of power across all aspects of American life, and that made sense to me. But the

shift in our communities toward black cultural nationalism did our community a disservice and does black people a disservice. As a people we played a role in the shift toward that ideology. The idea that we are all the same is in part one of its aftereffects. It's probably also a result of our experiences in slavery and with the Jim Crow racism of the South. In some ways you come together to survive. Even if you don't do so literally, you do conceptually, and I understand that.

I wasn't political as an eighteen-year-old. But I also didn't want to participate in documenting failure in black communities. In the mid-1960s I had read *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*. Around the time of Ocean Hill– Brownsville, I had decided I wasn't interested in discovering any more crap about black people. Then as a graduate student in psychology, I reread *Dark Ghetto* and understood it better. One of the things Kenneth Clark talked about in that book was cultural deprivation. I think our communities were culturally deprived then and still are today. Lowering standards or artificially creating a sense of self- importance in black kids by throwing black identity at them or records of black achievement will not cover over that failure.

The black cultural nationalism of the 1960s impacted a lot of people, including most definitely the universities. We ended up saying you can talk about certain things in the black community but you can't talk about them outside of it. If you speak Ebonics, for instance, then you're more black than those who don't, even if that means you're failing out of the school system. So I think we participated in creating a situation where we've left poor black people behind. Glorifying the culture of poor people in our communities isn't helpful to them. They are over there, and we relate to them as hip or whatever, but they're failing in communities that aren't growing.

The academic literature suggests that if you're born in poverty, it's harder to move beyond poverty – that you can't get out. The way that poor people have been related to over the last twenty or thirty years suggests the same thing. I was a psychologist in training during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and I have a real passion for black people. I hated the cultural deprivation movement because of how it was being used academically. And because I was concerned about it, I wouldn't touch it. But at some point you have to come to terms with the fact that we've been deprived, and that glorifying our culture is not going to change the failure our kids are experiencing in school. We need to come up with a methodology that accepts this failure and deprivation and moves us on to development.

So how do you do something about the hierarchy that's been built in to the educational system and that dominates what learning is for our kids? We have to create an environment where there's value to what kids produce. What we've looked to do at the All Stars Project is to build non-hierarchical models for learning.

The All Stars Project took shape as a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization after years of grassroots community organizing that began in the early 1970s. Dr. Newman and I founded the project in 1981. It comprises two youth programs – the All Stars Talent Show Network and the Joseph A. Forgione Development School for Youth – and the Castillo Theatre, an Off-Off Broadway theater for people of all ages.

Castillo specializes in experimental, socially relevant work, a brand of theater it calls "developmental theater." Like the youth programs of the ASP, Castillo is concerned with human growth. It gives kids a connection to the world of theater and culture that they wouldn't otherwise have. Pam Lewis, who is co- director of the Development School and national producer of the All Stars Talent Show Network, is also an actress in the Castillo Theatre ensemble. It's not unusual for her to bring what she's learning in the performance ensemble into the work with young people in the talent shows and the Development School. Many members of the full-time staff of the All Stars Project are actors in the Castillo ensemble.

We raise about $4 million a year for our theater projects and the two youth programs. We wanted to establish the integrity of the educational program without all the bureaucracy of government funding. Our independent financial footing has made a huge difference. Without it, you have to dance to somebody else's tune, which means you don't get to develop kids. For years, many wonderful volunteers have sat around telemarketing tables raising money to fund our projects. I was on the phones raising money about three nights a week for ten years. We also go out and talk to people in the streets about the importance of investing in the growth and development of young people of color, and the people we describe the programs to often become part of our volunteer telemarketing operation.

All three ASP programs are based on the use of performance as an important technique in human development. What we mean by performance is a capacity for human beings to do things that take them beyond themselves, to try on different costumes or identities, different ways of being in the world. It's a technique that allows people to reinitiate growth, because you can step outside of who you are and who you think you are, outside of "identity," and become both more of who you are and other than who you are. We've developed a learning approach that speaks directly to the kids in the black and Latino community who have been underdeveloped by our society. That's why we want to grow this learning approach and why we want people to know about it.

What we're doing with the ASP is raising the idea with kids that they can have many performances, and that if you have only that one performance you grew up with, then when you go out into the work world you're not prepared. You don't know what to do; you don't know how to participate. When people feel uncomfortable with them, the kids feel uncomfortable too. As an educator, I believe that part of what it means to learn – to be a real learner – is that you have to acquire a sophistication about the world. You have to be worldly in ways that a lot of our kids aren't. There are all these ordinary jobs and ordinary ways of being in the world that kids who come from very poor communities aren't exposed to and don't know about. We're teaching young people how to be more worldly and sophisticated, given that the dominant culture in our society is white, especially in the work world. We teach them how to perform on-stage at a talent show or in corporate America on Wall Street. They're learning both how to be more of who they are, as young black and Latino people, and more of who they are not.

We work with about twenty thousand kids a year in the All Stars Talent Show Network – every kind of kid you could imagine, between the ages of five and twenty-one and beyond. We're saying to kids, if you've never been accepted for anything, if you've

never filled out a form for anything, you should definitely try this. Young people who have already performed in shows go sign up kids on street corners in New York City, Newark, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Oakland. They ask, do you want to audition for a talent show? Some of them do the audition saying yeah, yeah, yeah, and when we accept them they're blown away. People bring friends and families to the auditions. Everyone who tries out gets in, though they don't know that before the tryout. For some kids, it's their first experience of success.

We have an audition, a workshop, and a show, and a parent meeting following each show. We put the kids on stage and they do hip-hop, and we don't censor them. They make their statement. But in the process they're creating a show, they're mentoring young people, and they're learning about performance, not just on stage, but as producers of something that's successful. The shows are amazing. I'm not anti–hip-hop culture. I don't think we should crush CDs. I actually like hip-hop. It's been played a lot in my house, and I don't have any problem with that. What I'm saying to young people is that hip-hop is not all we are. Black people have led the way in other forms of cultural experience and entertainment. Hip-hop culture is youth culture, but it's not the beginning or the end. Everybody's not going to be P-Diddy. The kids come to think that everybody can make a million dollars if you make a few rhymes. On some level they know that millions of them are not going to be able to do that, given the other things you have to learn and do to get there. We don't have to negate the positive aspects of hip-hop culture, and I don't think that being black has to be equated with hip-hop. I think it's a cultural expression that's in our community. To the extent that people insist that's the only way we can be, we have to engage kids by giving them other opportunities and other experiences.

Most of the kids realize this is their one shot. So across the board they perform their butts off, to use their expression. They take it and run with it. I think there are millions of kids – African American and Caribbean American and African and Latino – who are waiting for somebody to come into their community and say, I'm going to give you this so that you can develop. The kids are eating it up. African Americans in our program are just as able to take advantage of the opportunity as black children of immigrants, such as West Indians, contrary to the stereotype that says African-American kids are less good at learning. I think that in general African Americans are more jaded, because they live so close to luxury and yet so far from it. They've been living with a different perspective for a long time.

One of the things that's different about us is we don't insist that parents participate. We go directly to the kids, both for the All Stars Talent Show Network and for the Development School. The parents then see what the kids are doing and they say, my goodness, they're getting up at six o'clock in the morning to be somewhere. They're getting dressed, they're rehearsing in the hallways, they're performing. All of a sudden they're doing things with their lives that are unusual. The parents then show up to see what the kids are doing, and their attendance has grown over the years. I think it's the way to go, because it's challenging the parents. It's also including the kids in their own development and not tying it necessarily to parental participation. In some ways, parents have to decide what they want to do with their own lives. These programs are built for the

kids to make some decisions, and what the kids decide then impacts on what the parents do and say.

The parents are invited to come join a committee and be active builders of the All Stars Talent Show Network in their neighborhood. Many of our parents come out to get help on how to raise their young people, how to be more sophisticated and less narrow in what it is they're doing. The parents are isolated, and they don't often get a chance to ask questions of someone with a Ph.D., for better or for worse. There are things happening in the communities that parents are totally overwhelmed by. One of the dialogues I often have with parents whose kids are going to schools that are not supporting them is what it means to say to kids, you're in this school because we're poor. If I could do better, I would send you someplace else. I know that it's not working out, and I don't want to pretend about that, so let's figure out what we're going to do together, given that this is the best we have at this moment.

That's one of those conversations you're not allowed to have. But if you don't have it, you participate, I think, in both under-developing your child and creating a level of hostility between you and them, because you're sending them out into something that's not working and insisting that it work for them. Without this conversation, the failure at school reinforces the negative environment at home, and everybody hates everybody.

Our leadership training program, the Development School for Youth, was founded in 1997 as the result of ongoing conversations with some of our contributors who are businesspeople. They were looking for ways to become more directly involved with the kids' education. So we now have an after-school, supplementary education program for kids between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one that meets for three months, with three classes that meet once a week each in an after-school setting. After-school programs are where young people are learning a lot of things. I think white kids are better at what they do because they have exposure to after-school activities that make a huge difference.

The Development School enrolls 120 kids a year from more than thirty high schools in New York City and Newark. We go into the best high schools, the worst, and everything in between, and do outreach. We talk to the kids about coming on board and about what we stand for and about giving them a summer internship in Manhattan at the completion of the training, and I say to them that they can still grow. I'm looking for people who still want to grow. The kids come in to the program, and when you ask, why is it you're here, one of the things they say is, because I thought I was finished, meaning they were stuck where they were in life – and they're fifteen and sixteen years old.

We mix kids who are doing great in school with kids who couldn't get an A or a B if their lives depended on it. That kind of diversity is very interesting, because both groups of kids bring something different to the table. What I'm requiring them to do isn't particularly what any of them are so great at, and this creates an environment where all kinds of kids can grow. I'm not trying to get them to be like we were when we were kids, to re-create that environment that worked for us. I'm trying to give them an opportunity to be who they are and can be, based on what they bring to the table. That's a key aspect of the theoretical work we do.

After the kids go through our training at the Development School, we give them eight-week summer internships sponsored by Wall Street corporations like Blaylock & Partners and the CEO there, Ron Blaylock. We want the kids to be able to do what the affluent kids do. I tell them, we have a hip-hop show in the All Stars Talent Show Network. So wear those costumes to the show. But when you're going to Wall Street for your internship, I tell them, take the three earrings out of your ear, don't wear a nose ring, and put on a suit. I object to that being defined as "white behavior." That's ridiculous. The kids share experiences of putting on a suit for the first time and getting on a subway and having somebody move over and make space for them, for the first time. Or walking into a corporate building and having people respond to them as if they're people – not even people of importance, but ordinary people you don't have to defend yourself around. They like that experience, and then they start figuring out what else goes along with it. You can't blame them for not dressing like that without having someplace to go, or think they're going to just run around the streets of Bedford Stuyvesant or East New York or Jamaica with suits on. That would be insane. In some ways they are inspired to put on suits because they're participating in a new aspect of their lives. They're doing something different.

One young man in the Development School, a Puerto Rican student, said to me that somehow when he was in junior high school, he saw something about business and decided he wanted to be a businessman. But he didn't know how to get from his situation in the South Bronx to becoming a businessman. He was very frustrated and started not doing school and just hanging out. Then Pam Lewis showed up to do an outreach in his high school. Later this young man told me, Dr. Fulani, I felt like God had sent her. We hear stories like that over and over and over again.

One of our young men has an uncle who's a limousine driver somewhere in Florida. The young man had to put on a suit for a mock interview. Since the kids don't wear suits, for example, they don't know how to wear ties. So the young man called up his uncle and asked him how to put on a tie. He used the headboard of his bed to practice tying the tie. Then he came back and taught the other boys in the class how to do it.

Another young person was working with one of our adult corporate sponsors. The adult used to come in after the kid had already come to work. The kid came to work an hour early every day. Every time the adult came in, she would go in her office and close the door. The kid, because of her enthusiasm, would run to the door and throw it open to say hello without ever knocking. She did this for two weeks before the corporate sponsor said to her, you can't do that. In this setting, what you have to do is knock on doors.

I asked the sponsor why it took her two weeks to say this to the kid, and she said, well, because she didn't want to be racist. And I explained that it's more racist to assume you can't say it or that everybody knows this. Chances are the kid's family members don't do professional performances – they don't work in a corporate setting. It's also racist, in a more subtle way, to think there's going to be a problem in trying to teach the kid something new. People initially feel awkward at the start of the internships – both the kids and the sponsors. Everyone is learning a new performance.

We all learn through imitation in the better parts of our learning. When kids are learning how to speak, they creatively imitate people in their environment. We talk to young babies as if they know what we're talking about, and they don't. But we accept whatever they produce, even when they put words together in funny ways. We don't say, shut up until you know the grammar and the meaning of this word. We participate in the performance. The learning is much more interactive. And then they go to school and it stops. Imitation in school is considered close to cheating. In the Development School, we create an environment not too dissimilar from kids' early language environment, where young people together are able to perform. It's not a test performance. It's the use of performance and performed activity to promote growth and development for thousands of minority kids.

Many of us were told growing up that we had to learn to speak a certain way if we were going to get a job. We don't particularly try to change how kids in the Development School speak. We just put them in situations that are demanding of them, and they have to figure out that if they want to grow here, they're going to have to change a lot of things. I have predominantly white, well-to-do business people who train the kids for me. I tell them to teach the kids how to be white and they almost fall off their chair. They have all the liberal reaction of oh my God, we're going to step on their cultural toes. I tell them, believe me, after the twelve weeks of training they'll still be black. But why don't you use this time as an opportunity to share with them some of the secrets of white success and help them succeed in your world, given that your world is where we all end up having to work. "White" here is code for middle class, for upper middle class, but it's also code for moving beyond how many of us in these neighborhoods think of ourselves.

I'm meeting more and more black professionals whom I'm exposing to these very poor black kids. Black professionals want to immediately go and change the kids' language, like "aks" to "ask." White people do that also. This is remediation, and it conveys to kids that there's something wrong with what they're doing. This is very different from putting kids in an environment where they do new kinds of things. I teach white people that I want them to speak to the kids in the ways they themselves speak, because the kids can then grow off of what they're hearing. It's ridiculous if white people try talking hip to these kids. I'm trying to introduce these kids to a new world, not to hip white people. They learn the language that fits, and they start to speak it almost unconsciously. In a way they correct, if you will, themselves.

One of the things that white kids have that the black community doesn't have, going back to the notion of cultural deprivation, is a cosmopolitan world view. White kids go through a broadening of life experiences that makes them more worldly and sophisticated. We have kids living in New York City communities like Queens and Brooklyn today, forget thirty-five years ago, who never saw the World Trade Center. They didn't know it existed until September 11. Almost none of the young men in these communities know the experience of putting on a suit and walking down a street in Midtown and finding a way of being related to that's so very different from the usual ways in which they're related to. That trip across the bridge is measured in obstacles much greater than miles.

I don't really care whether the kids in the Development School become Wall Street

executives. I want them to know that Wall Street exists. I don't care what they do with that knowledge or that experience; I want them to have it. One of the reasons I'm concerned about the bottom 90 percent is that a lot of those kids don't ever leave our communities. Almost everybody focuses on the top 10 percent, the Talented Tenth, as W.E.B. Du Bois put it. Those kids are going to make it anyway, for the most part. I'm not saying that we shouldn't support the middle-class kids, but they're going to make it. They're going to be okay in the world. They're going to go out and do the things that black professionals do, and they're going to leave their communities. But there are millions of kids who don't leave their communities and who still deserve a better quality of life, who need to be related to and developed. I'm not so much interested in developing them to leave the community. Our All Stars shows focus on how we can grow people who are staying in the communities. A lot of people will decide to do that.

Dr. Du Bois is one of my heroes. But we were barely out of slavery when he spoke of the Talented Tenth. We were trying to do something very different then, which was to establish the fact that we were human beings. Today, the concept is sometimes misconstrued to mean that only 10 percent of the black community can develop. That misconception could be a result in part of the poverty and failed education in our communities, and the sense of discouragement that's followed. I was saying to a white corporate manager that we were interested in developing young people who never get to see Wall Street, kids who are not among our top 10 percent. I said, never would the white community be told that only 10 percent of them can develop. And he said, that's a good thing, because he was in the bottom 90 percent and would never have made it if that philosophy had been applied to him.

I guess that in terms of a nationalist understanding, I'm trying to get the kids in our programs to de-racialize. It's not a black or white thing when young people say to other young people, where are you going all dressed up; you're being white. It's peer pressure; basically young people saying to other youth, this isn't for you. Dressing up isn't a "white thing." A lot of what we think of in terms of color, because of how the society is structured, is not an issue of color. It's a class thing too. And we often confuse class with race.

I don't quite know what "authentic black culture" or "black authenticity" is. I think that there is no such thing, and that we've gotten into a lot of trouble with those kinds of terms, because they glorify narrow ghetto identities to the exclusion of other identities. It's fine that we know from where we've come and that we're knowledgeable about Africa. But I don't think that's the same thing as being able to perform in ways that are academically stable.

To me, blackness isn't monolithic. Most of the kids we work with are black by birth, but being black means many different things. I want them to have experiences of the larger world. They can figure out what the larger world is for them, and their experiences will then shape what it means for them to be black. The dominance of hip-hop images teaches poor kids this is how they have to behave to be authentic and successful. A lot of these images are crafted by middle-class black people who go to college and then come back with hip-hop and get cool. That's a choice, and they have the right to choose that. But

then they put on their suits and go do their other things, and usually make a lot more money doing these other things. A lot of white kids who come from affluent backgrounds are influenced by hip-hop, and they have five earrings and the whole bit. It's a performance. We're trying to teach inner-city kids that it's a performance that they don't have to be trapped in. They too can wake up the next day, put on a suit, and go to work.

I tell the kids that we need more nerds in the black community. Who has benefited from all of our hipness? A lot of white record companies and clothing companies. These companies are able to make fortunes off of marketing hipness in a way that most black kids can't or don't. The kids have got the hip part down pat. We train them to go to Wall Street and to walk into huge buildings and be able to produce a performance that's in step with what's going on there, and these experiences help the young people to grow.

The kids in the All Stars Project typically find themselves challenged by their peers as being less hip, and those challenges are often framed in the language of being "less black." However, kids who are failing in the school system join our program, do a corporate internship, and then go back into their communities and engage in a dialogue with their peers. Their peers see their growth. And they then ask them, what are you doing? Where you going? How do I get to be a part of that? The kids in the community are then starting to experience their friends as role models, and to be influenced by young people just like them who are doing different kinds of things. They're told to hang in there, and it means something, because it's coming from people like them, and "like them" is not just a matter of skin color. All of a sudden the world beyond their community, be it black or white, is not so far afield that they can't connect to it, because for the first time they see young people they grew up with on a street doing something different with their lives, and that's an inspiration.

What we've produced is their education, or development. We're doing things with these kids that the schools can't produce. And once you demonstrate success among this population, you are in a position to figure out even more for them. I'm looking to those of us who are more well-to-do to participate in that fight. We have to be more than role models. I think that for us, being a role model to some degree ends up getting used for not doing more of what needs to be done. If I'm black and I'm doing well and people can see me as a role model, then that's all I have to be, and all the black middle-class and upper-middle-class people don't have to have a connection to black poor people. We can't afford simply to be role models. There are ways in which we have to fight for our communities. We have to be connected to our communities. We have to find programs that allow our communities to grow and develop, and not think that it's enough to be seen.

Even on TV, the kids barely notice all the accomplishments of black people of our generation, the black role models of today, like Colin Powell and Maxine Waters. My experience is that when the kids recognize me on TV and say, oh I know Dr. Fulani, it's because they've seen me first in their communities. A lot of these kids don't know who Colin Powell is. It may seem impossible, but how could you have lived in New York and never see the World Trade Center? Dick Parsons, Franklin Raines, and others are more recent role models than the ones held up as examples in the community control

movements of the 1960s. But pictures hanging on the wall don't teach kids how to read.

I can't say I don't care whether successful black people give back. I do care. I have all kinds of opinions; I am opinionated. A black person doesn't have to give back, but then people can't claim that by virtue of their mere existence they are doing something to give back. You can't go around saying well, but if a kid has my picture in a tenement on a wall, that's enough to inspire them. I think the real deal is figuring out the challenge to successful black folks relative to what they need to do to give back. I think giving back has to be a commitment to developing not the top 10 percent but the bottom 90 percent and all that entails.

People want more. They battle for survival, and we can't ignore it. The notion that you don't commit crimes if you're really poor but good, as opposed to the bad poor, I think is a highfalutin description that has very little to do with what goes on in the world. Kids in poor communities of color talk about the culture of poverty. I hear heart-wrenching stories from sixteen- and seventeen-year-old black boys who say, I go to school; I do everything I can do to stay close to home. I live in a project. I don't sit on the park bench, because the cops come and they do roundups and everybody who's there gets picked up and you go spend one or two nights in jail. A lot of kids talk about being worried they're going to end up on the wrong path just by simply walking down the street.

There's a way in which we don't want to look at the realities of what our communities are, but we have to. We have to acknowledge the unhealthy and non- developmental things that are going on there that we want to end. We have to figure out what we need to do to grow the young people and the not-so-young people in those communities so they can have better lives.

What I'm saying to these kids and their parents in poor communities is, you can't wait any longer. I'm teaching young people that you have to work with what you have and you have to create with poverty and crap, if that's what's in our communities. You have to use that to go somewhere. I don't say to them, you have to do something first before I can participate in helping you develop. I take them with what they bring.

I think the black community in New York is reawakening to its political power. We have a long way to go, but one expression of our getting there occurred in November of 2001, when the black community did a magnificent thing. It broke with the Democratic Party and voted to the tune of 30 percent for Michael Bloomberg, our mayor, who was running both on the Republican ticket and with the Independence Party, which I helped to create. I went out on the streets and helped to build that party from the bottom up. This is something I'm very passionate about. One of the things I was teaching our community is that if for the first time we made a move to give someone other than a Democrat a significant portion of our vote, we would up our political clout overnight. It's taken thirty years and the right circumstances for people to learn that lesson, but it's had a tremendous impact on our community.

It's not about black people becoming the swing element and electing candidates when white people divide their votes. I think we should be the leadership in helping to create

new political paradigms in our country. The Independent Movement is made up of people who are interested in independent politics and who care about political reform, about making the process work and having more participation from ordinary people. In the black community there are some people who are of that sentiment and some people who are not. Introducing the Independent element into the voting process does makes it possible for black people to give further consideration to who they are politically. A lot of blacks are not going to go back to the Republican Party. People who have both built and are committed to the Democratic Party project that party as the place you go when you're black. Putting a new party in the mix and raising the contradictions – the failures, in my opinion – of the Democratic Party relative to empowering our community help to make black people take themselves more seriously as voters.

We live in a capitalist society, and we sure could benefit more from it than we currently do. The system knows how to make us work for it, so we should figure out how to get something out of that. I think that's extremely important.

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