

“We all must be committed to giving our young people the capacity to dream large dream large dreams and then prepare strategically to realize them.”

By Adelaide L. Sanford

Never Settle for Less

I WAS FORTUNATE to know my grandmother-my mother’s mother-who had been a chattel slave. At least once a year usually during the summer, my family in New York would visit my grandmother, who still lived in Mississippi. I was young, only 14 when she died, but I’ll always remember how she passed on to me her memory and knowledge of where our people had been and what they had done

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and their legacy of spirit and intellect. Above all, she gave me the understanding that we need not be defined by the meanest circumstances we meet in life.

I used to ask her. “How did you survive your life on a slave plantation? What gave you the will even to try? And how did you keep from hating?”

And she would say, “Because of all the hope that I had.”

But how could she have had hope? I’d wonder. How did she even know what to hope for? How did she know what might be possible?

Over time I learned that the hope that enabled my grandmother to work for a better life for herself and her family was tied to no grand scenario. Her hope was the knowledge that there was always the possibility of something better if she kept the faith and worked for it. In my grandmother’s time and long before, our people ventured to unknown places in search of freedom. They didn’t necessarily know what was in store for them along this journey or what they would find at the end of it. Often they met with disappointment, but they went on and made a life anyway.

We all have to understand that the future may not come just the way we expect it, but if we keep that hope, drive and determination, not only can we make a better future but it can also be one that may exceed our wildest expectations. This is what I learned at my grandmother’s knee.

We as people of African ancestry have to appreciate the ways in which all adults can informally feed a child’s sense of who she is and what her possibilities are. We all must be committed to giving our young people the capacity to dream large dreams and then prepare strategically to realize them. But there are countless situations in which you see young people settling for less than they deserve, often because we as adults settle for less. Consider today’s public-education and health-care systems: They are often unacceptable. Whether or not we are parents, we must all stand against unacceptable conditions and teach our children to do this as well. I remember how much I learned-things that enabled me to be humane and caring and devoted to sharing all of our best human qualities – I learned more from dedicated people in my community than from education in school.

Two doors away from my childhood home lived a wonderful man who would always inquire: “How are you doing in school? I want to see your report card when it comes.” Though he was a gifted math instructor, he worked in the post office because few Blacks were hired as teachers then in New

York public school system. Still, he used to tutor all the neighborhood kids, giving us confidence and keeping our aims high by supporting us in the expectations he had for us.

In your life, in your behavior and in your relationships with the children who surround you, you are an educator if only by your example. It’s a question of taking an interest and developing ties with the children – as well as their parents – in your environment. I worked in the same neighborhood school for 35 years, until I retired as a principal in 1985. But even now I keep up with families in a number of schools in Brooklyn and I continue to be a resource for the children when I can.

We particularly need to forge stronger links between our children and our elders. If older people aren’t a part of their experience, how can our young people have an understanding of and a respect for them and our rich past? There are simple ways of strengthening these important ties through our churches, communities and even business groups. We can encourage child-care and elementary-school programs to collaborate with senior-citizen services, for example, to form after-school programs that bring young and old together. After all, elders are the ones who give youths the knowledge of how far we have come and how they as a new generation can make a difference by never settling for less.

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