

The Following was an address delivered by Fred Means at the June 28, 1971 graduation at South Side High, Newark, New Jersey.

### **South Side High School: The Personification of a Black Future**

Dr. Litzky, Mr. Barrett, honored students on the dais, special guests, beloved parents and the Swinging Senior Class of June 1971; Habaragani!!!

I am ecstatically happy at being here on the evening of June 28, 1971 to deliver the commencement address for the June 1971 graduating class of South Side High School. On a similar evening in June 1951, I sat where you are sitting now and received my high school diploma from South Side. Some of the same teachers you have had, I had then. Later in 1965, I was to return and teach for five years in this building that has produced so many successful people. Many graduating seniors have either been in one of my classes or participated in the numerous Title I programs that I helped organize. I have worked with most of the teachers presently teaching at South Side. I know many parents from Title I advisory meetings, PTA meetings, other community meetings, or from passing you in the street or stores of the neighborhood. I grew up down the street on Ridgewood Avenue.

Until two years ago, either the principal or the vice principal or a department chairman or some other authority figure would choose the commencement speaker. It seems clear that if authority figures had been choosing, Immau would not have been your speaker last year. Similarly, I wonder if I would be standing here tonight.

We certainly are moving into a new era. You, the graduating class of June 1971 chose me to be your speaker. I cherish your decision as probably the highest honor I will ever receive in life. To think that something in our relationship during the past 3 or 4 years that we were together enabled you to see me as being worthy of rapping to you on this superlatively splendid occasion, is indeed touching.



It's been said that a person's qualifications to be involved in any area should be evaluated on the basis of his possessing two qualities—Personal Stake and Expertise. Personal stake meaning that a part of you is invested and expertise meaning the skill necessary to do the job.

I have just given some indication of my personal stake in you. I leave it for you to judge indicators of expertise.

Tonight, I would like to talk briefly with you about "South Side High School: The Personification of a Black Future". In examining this question, I would like to focus singularly on the groups that must be directly involved in educational change—namely parents, teachers and students.

Parents, for the last 5 graduations held here at South Side, I have wanted the speakers to sock it to you. Last year, I asked Imamu to do it. He wouldn't. The year before, I asked Ken Gibson to do it. He wouldn't. Eureka! Here we are tonight!

One of the advantages that I have as graduation speaker, is the fact that I am a member of the immediate family. Tonight we are going to examine some family problems and tell it like it is.

During my tenure as Title I coordinator, I saw my main responsibility as involving the parents of South Side students in the life of South Side. I worked diligently attempting to accomplish this end. I tried to initiate programs that would enable us to make this building a community school. Rather than having this isolated structure on the top of the hill stand empty after 3:00pm, weekends and practically all summer, why can't this building be an integral part of the life of this community?

It's rumored that by and by, we are going to get a massive addition to South Side. Unless there's a difference in you, the new building wouldn't matter. Do you know that there's a reading laboratory upstairs in which it has been demonstrated that reading levels can be elevated an average of almost 2 grade levels during a three-month period? Not only should the number of day students exposed to the lab be increased, but what about the idea of having the lab open nights for older people desirous of increasing their reading skills? Do you have



any idea what's being taught in this school and how well it's being taught? When was the last time you challenged anything about South Side? Why aren't community meetings held at South Side?

This building doesn't belong to the Board of Education or the teachers. It belongs to you! It is true that parents of younger children are getting more involved in the elementary schools of our city. Often parents tend to feel that when their children reach the junior and senior high school levels, however, they don't have to be as concerned about what happens in school. Parents, this school desperately needs your involvement.

The psychologist, Maslow describes a six-level hierarchy from which human beings operate. These needs must be met in rank order. Once reaching a particular level it is possible to return to a lower level; however, one cannot skip to higher levels.

1. Physiological needs—food and shelter
2. Security and safety
3. Social affiliation
4. Esteem
5. Autonomy
6. Self-actualization

Your children are your most precious possessions. They are extensions of yourselves, hopefully, left here to continue after you cross over the bar. Children are dying in the schools of Newark! What does James Brown say, "Without an education you might as well be dead." May I suggest that the saving of your children's lives falls on the first level of need distribution. Your children will only be saved through your direct intervention in the schools that they attend. How many of you parents out there tonight have other children in Newark schools?

Over the past five graduations, I've heard graduates plead for additional tickets to accommodate all the people who wanted to see them graduate. Where were you during the 3 or 4 years that the children spent in the school? You were invisible then and now you come to shower accolades. It is insufficient! It is not enough.



For five consecutive graduation, parents, I wanted someone to tell you this. You know Ken Gibson often talks about the need for the sleepers among us to wake up. As you know sleeping has always been the posture that the "man" preferred that we maintain. Because a sleeper doesn't have time to get involved in matters that affect his life. He is happy to allow somebody else to run his life—whether it's in the best interest of the sleeper or not.

The sleepers in South Side and yes in Newark are life a great giant beginning to stir—ever so slightly.

My message to you tonight is clarion— "Rise up oh great awakening giant and TCB!!"

### **Regarding Teachers and continuing to tell it like it is**

The 11-week strike of teachers beginning on February 1, 1971 had the same kind of affect on South Side and other Newark Schools as did the birth of Jesus have on the world. In the latter instance, we talk about "B. C." and "A. D.". In the former instance, we talk about before strike and after strike. Before the strike, the teaching force at South Side presented the façade of congeniality. The various cliques among the staff were waving greetings from afar and chatting amicably from opposite corners of the teachers' room. Since the overwhelming majority of teachers participating in the 16-day 1970 strike by teachers, the only people being ostracized by some of the cliques were people like me who did not strike.

The majority of Black teachers participated in the 1970 strike, however, the majority of Black teachers did not participate in the 1971 strike. Oh, there goes that damn Fred Means talking that racist talk again.

Racism? How do you explain the fact that more than 60 percent of the people in the city of Newark are Black? 82 percent of the kids in Newark Public Schools are Black and Puerto Rican? 99 percent of the kids at South Side are Black. 1 percent are Puerto Rican?



Do you know that 25 years ago my family integrated a neighborhood down on Sherman Avenue? A few years later, we integrated a neighborhood on Ridgewood Avenue. Only a short time ago, other Black people integrated the Weequahic section. All these neighborhoods are now Black. Racism? Wow!

Yes, after the strike, the composition of some of the cliques changed. Striking teacher don't speak to non-striking teachers. Some striking teachers have been known to refuse to accept late slips signed by non-striking teachers, but presented to them by students. Across the city teacher absenteeism has been 3 times higher than normal since the strike.

It might be helpful to examine several perspectives from which teachers operate:

1. The striking teacher who is a few years from retirement— isn't doing much teaching, simply marking time.
  2. The striking teacher who is trying to get out of Newark, but because the teacher market is so tight, can't— isn't doing much teaching, simply marking time.
  3. The non-striking teacher who did not strike because he or she did not want to lose the money— isn't doing much teaching, simply marking time.
  4. The non-striking teacher who did not strike because he or she understood that the strike had nothing to do with improving education for children; rather, having to do with power and money for teachers and teachers' organizations.
- Some of these teachers are expressing genuine concern for students and making a sincere effort to teach— some are not.

5. The striking teacher who either did not understand the real issues or was caught up in a group action and was fearful of not participating. Some of these teachers seem to be concerned and are making efforts to teach— some are not.

There are some other perspectives but, I think the point has been adequately made. The question is, how much serious teaching is going on at South Side? If you want to check this out, may I suggest that you ask a cross-section of South Side students the following question: How many of the 6 or 7 teachers that you have everyday do you feel really give a damn about you? The answers will astound you.



Let's focus momentarily on one of the more interesting cliques of teachers that exercise a great deal of influence on decision making at South Side. This group, of course would tend to evaluate every decision in terms of how its best interest is to be served. Many times what the clique sees as its best interest is diametrically in opposition to the best interest of the students. Remember expertise and personal stake. If members of the groups does not have a personal stake they cannot possibly see their best interest running parallel to the best interest of the kids. Some might want to seriously question the level of expertise also however, we won't pursue that point at this time. Perhaps you parents will want to follow-up on that issue.

It might be helpful if I cite two examples of what I'm talking about. It's my understanding that an assembly program scheduled involving the Young Lords was stopped because of pressure from one the teacher cliques that felt that this program would be threatening to them. I understand the students organized to ensure that the program be allowed to proceed because they saw a presentation by the Young Lords as an important factor in their educational development.

The second example involved my attempt to get certain statistical information about South Side that should have been public information. Individuals in one of these status quo cliques, tried to prevent my obtaining the information. If you are doing the best job that you can do, why should you be afraid to be scrutinized by the public eye? Could it be that you do not wish your failure exposed?

In both of these examples, we see a clash of values and an absence of personal stake on the part of some clique members.

As I see it, improvement at South Side may only occur when those teachers who feel that they possess both expertise and personal stake unite in a group that will have as its main focus, elevation of the quality of education at South Side. Those who do not have both expertise and personal stake must go, because it is abundantly clear that they will continue to sabotage progress at South Side all in the name of serving what they see as their best interest.

Dr. King—standing on this very spot on the afternoon of March 27, 1968—eloquently issued the challenge to you concerning teachers, “organize baby,



organize". And plug into the awakening giant. Those who would destroy education in Newark are already organized and aggressively working.

### Students

Now we come to the main event, the center of attraction, descendants of the great empires of Bahana, Mali and Songhay, "big Stuff, Swinging Seniors of June 1971—Habaragani!

Earlier, I talked about South Side High the personification of a Black Future. In the 1930s 75% of the Black population of the U. S. lived in the rural south. Today 75% of the Black population of the U. S. lives in the urban north. What the future holds for Black people in American is still an open question. Will we be able to fulfill the American Dream of assimilation into the melting pot? Will we be able to co-exist with white American travelling along the two roads of cultural pluralism? Will genocide be committed against Black people as it was against the American Indians? The question has not been resolved.

Since education is such an important factor in making it in Western society, the South Sides of America may well determine the success or failure of our people. I'm sure you have heard Ken Gibson say, "Wherever the cities of America are going, Newark will get there first". So it is, that the Newark's of America may well determine the successes or failures of our people.

The question that you graduating seniors must ask yourselves is, "What is my role in helping to save my people?"

When I came to South Side in 1965 to teach, I was astounded by the degree of apathy existing in the student body. I hadn't been aware of that kind of hopelessness existing here when I was a student some 15 years earlier. You just seemed to accept everything without question and behave like puddles of skin. Whatever spark of life students had in them had been effectively repressed for jail-like school life. You didn't even have many fights.



I understand that this was simply another indicator of how the society has beaten us down as a people. What is it that Sly and Family Stone say, "You can make it if you try". The Impressions cry, "We're a winner and we're moving on up."

Rev. Jesse Jackson of Operation Breadbasket boomed from this very stage, "I am somebody".

Dr. Martin Luther King, also from this platform, prophesized,

"Build baby build,  
Organize baby organize,  
Learn baby learn,  
So you can earn baby earn".

The Panthers started us saying, "Right on!"

And so the challenge to you the graduating class of June 1971 is to get yourselves together and return to help your people. Your goal cannot be to escape to suburbia and forsake your folks. Newark will catch you in Short Hills.

The future of Black people in America will not be handled on an individual basis. Because it is the group that will be dealt with, it must be the group that deals. Seek out your role in the group.

It's interesting to note how difficult it is to perceive the real world from South Side. In talking to recent graduates like Anna Banks and Gloria Coon, I was alerted to the fact that exposure to the world out of South Side and out of Newark, can be a shocking experience. Their perception of their own skill levels was not as competitive as they thought. They had not developed good study skills and had not been taught how to think. They were not prepared to deal with overt and naked racism. Racism at South Side had taken a more covert form and was more difficult to perceive or understand.

It is important that recent graduates return to South Side to talk to the underclassmen. It's surprising how quickly you learn once you leave South Side. Moreover, you will be able to communicate with students more effectively than



older people. When you return, talk to the students about cutting and their school attendance. One thing is certain, no matter how high the quality of the offering in school, students can't learn if they not here.

When you see the younger kids also speak on the amount of time they spend high. We in the Black community can't sit idly by waiting for Nixon or Hoover to stop the flow of drugs into this community. We have to understand that we can temporarily escape our environment by being high, but we can't rebuild our neighborhoods and enrichen our lives while we are high. It's much easier to die than to live, to escape from life than to work to enhance the quality of life. The Black community does not need junkies and people who can't face life—rather we need builders and producers. Yes indeed, it is Nation Time!

Tell your brothers and sisters who remain that they should organize strong student groups that they control. These groups should then plug into the group of concerned teachers and the awakening giant of parents. Nation Time! That's what it's all about.