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A Message to Milwaukee's African American Community: "A Shift in the Wind"

By Alderman Russell W. Stamper, II

We must take pride in ourselves. We must take inventory of what we do and how we can intensify our efforts to turn the tide in our community. Too many times we have relied upon others to come to our rescue. Too often we have relinquished control of our destiny. These times must be no more.

I am reminded of something Dick Gregory once said, "When there is a raging fire, the only thing that will save you is a shift in the wind." Our community is on fire and we are the powerful shift in the wind that's needed. Those of us that serve as government officials are charged with the task of leading. More importantly, however, we are lifelong residents of this community. We experience the same fears and anxieties in our travels through this city's streets as the rest of us do. We share the nagging doubts about the likelihood of a successful upward trajectory for our community. Yet we push our doubts aside and hold fast to our faith in the strength and determination of our constituents. We serve patiently and work diligently with hope for our future. The heavy lifting, though, will be done, must be done by all of us, the people.

We African Americans have a rich, complex history in Milwaukee. From the glory days of Bronzeville to its eventual rebirth thanks largely to the tireless efforts of Alderwoman Coggs; from the Sherman Park unrest to its strong resurgence led by Alderman Rainey and me; from the re-branding of the 9th District spearheaded by Alderwoman Lewis to the Promise -Zone initiatives of Alderman Hamilton; and from the progressive forward movement ushered in by Alderman Johnson to the disparity study passage that will lay the foundation for a race conscious program, which I have championed, Black Milwaukee has been in constant motion.

Most recently we have the return of a successful African American centered event at the Summerfest grounds (Black Arts Festival) and events such as Bronzeville Week and Hip Hop Week MKE. These developments signal an upward trajectory of our African American Community here in Milwaukee. Although we are not there yet, we are destined to truly become a city of diversity and inclusion. In order to reach this worthy goal, however, we must all pitch in and do our part.

No politician, no matter how amazingly gifted he or she may be at connecting with the people, representing their interests, acknowledging their concerns and authoring legislation, etc., can make a community fulfill its real potential. That can only be done by the community. No amount of policing or law enforcement will completely eradicate the violence that has recently struck our community. That can only be done by a determined change in the thinking and action of the people.

Within the last two weeks we have had an officer killed in the line of duty, a string of homicides, a young man shot while playing basketball who is clinging to his life but through the grace of God (one of his neighbors treated him until the paramedics arrived), and last, the most damaging to my soul, an eight year old shot on 34th Street. In order for our children to thrive in an

environment of security free from fear we must right the ship. Illegal drugs, shootings, prostitution, crime and a lack of community pride fuel a violent turmoil.

No longer can we sit and wait for others to rescue us. We must take the helm and accept responsibility. Our young people must understand that street violence is not a game to be played, but is real life and the consequences of poor decisions cannot be reversed as in a board game. A get-out-of-jail-free card does not exist in real life. We do not get to do do-overs. We get one life. That is all. What we do with it is up to us.

It is up to us as a community to provide guidance and direction to our children. We cannot abandon them. We must make available positive alternatives to the allure of the much romanticized “street life.” This means that our community must reject any and all negative behavior claimed as an inevitable part of daily life.

Similarly, we have to reject being afraid in our homes, on our streets or in our neighborhoods. These are our streets and belong to our community. We must define the quality of our lives by requiring acceptable behaviors. Let us never forget how our parents and grandparents marched and fought for us to be able to live, eat and play wherever we want. So fear not, we are coming back. We as a Community are on the rise.

We will reach the success that we all envision. We is the operative word. It will take all of us. It will take us not being afraid of our children. It will take us overcoming deep differences with the police and picking up the phone to report negative behavior. You are not a snitch when someone displays disrespect for the neighborhood in which you or they live. It will take all of us becoming politically involved and engaged. It will take us ALL BEING ACTIVE, not just meetings and loud talk when the microphones are on, not allowing our youth and young adults to terrorize our elderly, not waiting on someone to come save us from us.

We all know the history of what got us in this situation. We can't go back and change any of that, but what we can do is make a decision, as a community, that we just won't accept it anymore. I'm sick of it. I know my sentiments are echoed throughout this great community of ours. I hear it every day. So I beg of all of you to volunteer for an organization that is in these streets doing the work. Donate your time and money to these organizations. Start or join a block club. Start or join a neighborhood watch. We have to all look after each other. We cannot wait on the promise of prosperity in all areas. We have to seize the moment.

“WE” have to be the shift in the wind.

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