Young, gifted and Black—What no one told me about being ‘first’ to go to college

By BRANDON TERRELL

I was reared and schooled in Detroit, where poverty and oppression eloquently danced while violence and crime serenaded the communities.

The crime and oppression in my neighborhood drove me to submit a college application that changed my life's trajectory. I wasn't going to college to become an adult; I faced mature challenges and struggles long before filling out my college applications. For me, higher education represented an escape from adult struggles.

But, I couldn't escape the financial challenges. For first-generation college students like me, the responsibilities designed for mature adults were often delegated to us adolescents. Now that I'm in graduate school, I have some distance and perspective on what first-gens really need to thrive at a four-year college.

And, despite some much-needed programs at universities, I fear the current political climate and threatened budget cuts will only make it harder for first-gens to obtain a four-year degree.

I know from experience that my journey as a first-gen and nontraditional undergraduate college student is devastatingly common.

No one in high school or college spoke to me about the financial realities of the student who can't rely on family for support. FAFSA, Pell Grants and loans were foreign concepts. The conversations I had growing up rarely involved college. We talked about who was buying dinner that night or who needed to get a job to help pay bills.

Survival was the goal. By the time I applied to college, I had already tangled with life and boxed with oppression, discrimination, stereotypical beliefs and negative ideologies, all while juggling school, plus a job or two.

Life had prepared me for college. But the challenges never stopped coming.

Even as I struggled to pay tuition and buy meals when the food courts closed for the weekends, I often got calls from relatives who needed help buying groceries. Relief started with me. I had no safety net—I was the safety net.

Completing college required a survival balancing act—maintaining my GPA, bridging gaps back at home and navigating collegiate bureaucracies while carefully responding to microaggressions and prejudice in majority white spaces.

Spectators would classify the underlying factor of our motivation as “grit” or “determination,” but for many first-gens, our motivation is simply survival. We have no choice.

Missing an assignment, being too tired to attend a bio lecture after working more than 30 hours a week, failing a 300 level course or even missing a tuition payment created a slippery slope back to the environment that suffocated dreams.

But we are a population colleges cannot afford to lose; we represented 36 percent of students seeking a four-year degree nationwide in 2012. Politicians, educators, social workers, counselors and administrators must address the intersecting social and cultural challenges that precede our applications, accompany us to college and follow us even after securing a degree.

Access to college and financial aid is not enough to secure a better quality of life for students coming from low-income backgrounds. The gap is widening, with only 14 percent of the most economically disadvantaged students earning a bachelor's degree, according to a 2015 federal study.

We need a different support system to thrive in college—mentors, help with living expenses, travel costs, tutors, flexible schedules and emotional support from other students who feel isolated but are coping with similar struggles.

We need to stop talking about college attainment in simplistic ways. It takes so much more than grit.

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Harlem sends home one of its cornerstones, Dr. Jack Felder

By AUTODIDACT 17

Special to the AmNews

Fellow activists, associates and educators attended going home services at the Williams Institutional CME Church, (2225 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd.) this past Sunday evening and Wednesday morning to bid farewell to one of Harlem's stalwart African scholar warriors. Dr. Jack Felder, 78, joined the ancestors Dec. 3, after serving the Harlem community with his wealth of knowledge and wisdom for many decades.

African drummers ran off some rhythmic beats to set the tone for the ceremony as several hundred gathered to pay their respects to the uncompromisingly proud African, who devoted his life to researching, and sharing, the true heritage of the Motherland and his people.

Professor James Small recalled knowing his colleague for several decades, and mentioned his tireless efforts in making sure his people were properly informed about their true African ancestry, whether as an instructor at Harlem Prep during the early 1970s, or at the assorted universities where he taught or at the Harlem community university along 125th Street.

"He never lost touch with the young," Small noted. "I used to say, 'We deposit ourselves in our children.' He said, 'No, we deposit our children.' That's African culture."

Throughout the years, Felder spoke at local lecture halls, namely the Oberia Dempsey Center on 127th Street and Brooklyn's Slave Theater on Fulton Street, with the United African Movement, as well as at the First World Alliance in Harlem, so that he could get his thoroughly researched information to the common people.

Nana Camille Yarborough led a chant to spark the African spirits before speaking about Felder's unconditional love for his African people. She then added, "Some people, when they leave here, they leave a little dust, or nothing at all, but you can always judge them by their children." She heaped praises on Felder's son, Nova, and how the two were a regular fixture on 125th Street in front of Mart 125, as they distributed CDs, DVDs and literature to the community.

"He wanted us to know who we are," commented street scholar, Brother Sekou, who also remembered his fellow activist being a very hospitable, non-egotistical humanitarian who was consistently community oriented.

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