

Public Testimony in support of the African-American Affairs Commission  
Offered by Rayna Dyton-White

The African American Affairs Commission was founded one year after I graduated from Windsor Public High School. At that time I was very active in my local and state community. I was a tutor in Windsor for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders who were at risk of being retained; almost all were of African descent, and in fact I simply cannot remember that there were any white children in the program. I was the town of Windsor's representative for the Governor's Youth Advisory Committee for DRUGS DON'T WORK and had spoken at the governor's mansion and several other venues, I was a Common Ground graduate and participated on their youth alumni board, and held two jobs- one as an ice cream clerk, the other facilitating trainings as a peer educator on HIV/AIDS and sex education awareness. And I knew I was not going to college in Connecticut. My mother moved to Windsor from Hartford, withdrawing me from the Project Concern program, so we could see a more diverse pool of African-Americans. But it was there that I saw what tracking really was. I was in honor level courses. Despite the town having more Middle class and affluent African-Americans than West Hartford, the district where I was bused, they were not in honor classes with me. It was literally of small pool of us who were in honor level courses and we all know who the others were. I longed to belong, to not be singled out as a smart or nerdy person, at 15 and 5'10 I already felt awkward enough. So I rebelled and simply did not do my homework, I just refused to participate. I also had no Black teachers that taught honor level courses. I literally fought my way down, not up. Thankfully my mother and a dedicated Vice Principal "weren't having it." I graduated in the top 3<sup>rd</sup> of my class and received offers from local colleges, I didn't even apply. I knew I wanted to major in Sociology and become a program developer; I planned to return and work with my mother who ran a Human Service consulting business. But that changed when I went to college, I felt like a slave who escaped to the North, and wondered, why did I stay there for so long?!

I went to the black college tour and fell in love w/ Morgan State University. When asked why? My reply was and still is to this day, that it was the first place, outside my family and a small circle of close friends, where I didn't feel the need to fit into

the idea of what was "Black" something prevalent at Windsor High, and forget about any recognition of my culture at Norfeldt elementary or King Philip Middle. And this was just during the day long visit! I will never forget looking up and seeing the statute of Frederick Douglas as I crossed the University's Welcome Bridge, this was something Connecticut could not offer. I looked and remembered being sent to the principal's office in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for giving a report on Frederick Douglas and his story of winning a fight against his slave master. My foot locker was packed by July 4<sup>th</sup>.

I loved my friends, my job at the ice cream shop, but I needed to be affirmed, as I was. I needed to be able to open my mouth and speak and not have stares of astonishment from most, and looks of disdain from my black peers. Morgan gave me that affirmation. I knew it would not happen at UCONN, Smith, North Eastern or any of the colleges up here. I wasn't affirmed just because there were other Black students, I was affirmed because there was an air of acceptance for whom ever you were, or wanted to be. All of the Black students weren't there on athletic scholarships, we were actors, teachers, chemists, social workers and Morgan put out more Black engineers in the state of Maryland than any other University. I barley came home that first year; my mother had to request me back.

It was also in my first year at Morgan that I recognized what an excellent education I did receive in West Hartford and Windsor and how well prepared I was for college. I met other friends from Connecticut and we bragged about how our education at public schools rivaled the education of kids who came from private schools in other states. I graduated from Morgan with a 3.3, an academic scholarship, and a member of the Golden Key Honor Society.

To give more credit to CT schools I was also one of the few people at Howard Law who went to Public Schools my entire life, even Morgan was a State Institution. Just about everyone else had gone to private schools, or magnet schools that you had to test into. Despite an excellent education system, a beautiful landscape and affordable homes- in comparison to the Baltimore/DC area- it was not enough to keep me here. I told everyone I would only come back after law school if, I was already married and wanted children b/c the schools were good, or never

wanted to get married and have no children because meeting other Black professionals was a slim chance. All the people who went to college like me also stayed out of state. Why put my children through the same experience? Because it made me tough, bitter and scarred, but tough. And I did return w/ two degrees, and a fiancée who brought three degrees and a federal clerkship with him.

What does this have to do with the AAAC? The AAAC is the ONLY commission, the only state wide group that understands this experience and how policy largely governed my experience and the quality of life many African-Americans experience. I worked for organization that collaborated with them in 2001 on restoring ex-felons rights, and I was glad to see the state finally having an investment in the success of African-Americans, and not pathologizing our culture. I never felt invested in growing up here, I was keenly aware that I was an incidental beneficiary of this state's education system, but I knew that this place was never meant, nor built for me. I returned to the state in large part because of the changes I saw taking place in 2000 and 2001, the AAAC, Democracy Works and other groups appeared to be creating a State of inclusion. Democracy works is now gone. And the now the AAAC hangs by a thread?! The AAAC was underfunded then, but they worked hard and they rarely complained for themselves, but always were a voice for those of us who felt it was no longer worth speaking up. Apathy happens.

Quality of life matters. As I live in CT now seeing the State through the eyes of an adult, not a rebellious teenager or resentful young adult, I see a lot of regression. My husband is from Detroit and even he thinks this place needs a lot of improvement. He is floored by the blatant disparities that exist between those of African descent and White people; he has already experienced the shock and surprise by white co-workers when they learn of his credentials and has been openly questioned about why he has a J.D. and MBA. He has questioned why would I want to raise our children "in this?" which is how he refers to the State. He sees the close and wonderful community I have, but is not impressed with the quality of life offered here to African-Americans.

The programming and advocacy of the AAAC is the lifeline of African American progress and success in this state. I am not interested in, nor will I support with my tax dollars what governor Rell has offered here. I won't refuse to pay taxes, but we can take our degrees and income base and MOVE. It wouldn't be my first time.

I urge you all to consider all you stand to lose, for what the few dollars you think you might gain.