

The Power of "Obama Love": the message that Black marriage matters

Dr Lynda Morris Parham

As the world watches President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama take center stage, their very presence debunks many of the negative images of Black Americans. One of the most powerful messages that emanates from their lives is that Blacks can achieve a high-quality and committed marriage. While Obama's presidency reflects the significant gains made by individuals over the past 40 years, we must also note Blacks have experienced a downward trend of two-parent households from 70% in 1968 to 48% in 2002.

For many Blacks, marriage has not been a part of their family experience. Consequently, they have not received the benefits that marriage brings to men, women, and children. This marriage gap is a major health disparity that hinders the health and quality of life for many. According to a study published by the Institute for American Values, married African Americans are typically wealthier, happier, and choose healthier behaviors than their unmarried peers. Black children who

come from homes with married parents have less delinquency, higher self-esteem, better educational outcomes, and delay sexual activity.

Marriage is a "community" health issue because it is not simply an agreement between two adults. Marriage is a foundation that creates the sustainable relational dynamics for the couple, their children, the extended family and the larger community. When two people decide to marry, they are making a public declaration of their relationship. Family, friends and their larger communities will recognize their marital bond. The marital commitment is also publically validated by social systems that have relevance to the couple, such as religious, cultural and legal traditions.

The private love between the two has significance to others in that they publically agree to practice commitment, honesty, respect, self-sacrifice and fidelity. Given the public declaration of these attributes, the marriage bond has more significance than two people who choose to



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simply co-habitate. When there is co-habitation and not marriage, the health benefits and shared purpose that are accorded to marriage do not exist.

Marriage stabilizes individuals, families and communities. Marriage builds bonds between individuals, within and between families. Even when the marital bond is severed there can be lasting family relationships that are sustained and provide security. The marriage may fail; but the sense of family can be enduring because it has usually included more than the two individuals who joined in marriage.

Due to economic and social

realities for Black marriages, many Black families have lived out non-traditional ways of partnering and creative extended family arrangements. Despite the fewer number of marriages today, historically there have been Black couples who have flexible parental/gender roles and shared partnering with regards to finances and family decisions. As we move to support an increase in the numbers of Black marriages, let us remember the ways that marriage was strong and healthy in our communities.

The lessons of unconditional commitment, working together, taking the bitter with the sweet and life long companionship are learned in marriage. These same lessons are the building blocks of good character and strong relationships; they make each of us better friends, family members, employees and citizens. If the marriages around us deteriorate where will we and our children learn these valuable life lessons that improve our individual and collective social, economic and psychological well-being.



Husband and wife team Derryl and Shelia Gibbs Sr., owners of Optical Expressions in Springfield, MA (see ad on page 17)

Shelia, a licensed optician for over 12 years, said she wanted to have her own business one day -- that was her dream. Last Summer, she lost her job because her boss retired and sold his practice. Knowing that The Lord has always guided her family she remembered her husband's famous phrase, "We can only go forward" and together they proceeded to start their own business. Shelia says, "My husband, is so wonderful -- he's behind me 200% and he's been such a great help to get everything off and running."