

Our Stomachs Are Full, But Our Hearts Are Empty

by Thomas Rocky Wade

It was strange when I walked through the makeshift Holocaust museum at the Israeli Expo in Atlanta. The floor was cold, the walls of the cell seemed to close in on me, and I felt that people stood too close to each other. In the cold my mind wandered, and I thought back to growing up in the Capitol Homes—of spending over 10 years in an apartment much smaller than the museum space, of the scent of gas and the hiss of a radiator coming on to warm the cold air, and of the presence of too many people close together. Yet that was not fully the way that I remember growing up in the Capitol Homes. Although the floor was cold, an extended family of caregivers throughout the project provided what we now call the “social safety net.” I remember the cheers of solidarity when our ball team played Grady Homes’ ball team. I remember the pride that residents took in scrubbing the small porches and washing the windows. Especially I remember the children, now adults, who grew up with me, went on with me to college, and are now productive citizens of our society.

My childhood friends: Mike became the vice-president of a national corporation. Gloria is now the owner of one of the most successful real estate firms in metropolitan Atlanta. Norman became the owner of a Star Route franchise from the Post Office. Only one of my peers succumbed to the temptation of drugs and left us much too early. As for me, I finished college, became a Presidential Management Intern with HUD, and have worked in the field of housing and economic development for 20 years. I have served as the

southern district director of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation and now serve as an economic development consultant to the Housing Authority of Fulton County, Georgia, where the watchword is “Resident Initiatives.”

I am trying in my own small way to express that life “in the projects” can be a transition to a life of greater independence and growth for those who live there.

And so I found it strange that I felt like a participant in a 12-step recovery program when I was asked to speak to a class of Leadership Atlanta. It was hard to utter that now familiar refrain, “Hello, my name is Rocky, and I am an alumnus of public housing.” Why did I hesitate in getting those words out? I wanted to lift my voice like Jesse Jackson and shout, “I am somebody, even though I lived in the Capitol Homes.” Yet I hesitated.

We are in an age when the best and brightest of our society, many of them alumni of public housing, are afraid to say where they came from and are ashamed of circumstances over which they had little control. Thus they are unable to support others who are in that situation today. It is a shame that they are unable to talk about their past. I was wrong to hesitate that day, and I hope that my realization will guide me to do better in the future.

But I feel sorry for my country. Where is the compassion and love we should have for each other in a society where all people should have worth, or at least dignity? It is as if our stomachs are full and our hearts are empty. Do I have a grand plan to solve the ills

of society? No. I do believe, however, that any great movement starts with one person who is willing to step forward and take a risk. Therefore, I will be the one who says that it is time for the alumni of public housing to come forward and let our voices be heard, our numbers be counted, and our successes be trumpeted. Let our hearts be full of love for those who need help along the way. What is my dream? To see thousands, or millions, of Americans step forward and be counted in the national crusade for clean, decent, safe, sanitary, and affordable public housing. What is my strategy? To see those same Americans involved in “Committees of Correspondence” to open the lines of communication about this

issue. What is my goal? That we treat others with the dignity they deserve as members of our society.

Finally, I would like to see the national debate about public housing be reduced to a simple statement, shared with me by a sage in Cabbagetown in Atlanta, Horace Carson: “If you ain’t gonna help people up, please don’t put them down.” We cannot build a fair and decent society by putting down the residents and alumni of public housing. We *can* build it when we start to help people make better lives for themselves. It will start with a small step by each of us. Let me begin, “My name is Rocky, and I am an alumnus of public housing.”

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