

Michael Aptman's Peace & Harmony Talk

March 5, 2009

Violence is preventable. Let me repeat that statement. Violence is preventable. Therefore the essential question shifts to determining whether it's worth the price. Having suffered the devastating emotional scars of the murder of my daughter, I could play the emotional card that it's worth the cost of the entire \$800 billion dollar stimulus bill. However, I'd rather discuss the value of violence prevention in terms of cost effectiveness.

Let's understand the magnitude of the problem and the need for change to make progress. After all, change and hope have been the buzzwords of this past political year.

A violent crime is committed every 30 seconds and a murder every half hour. If you are an African American male, your odds of being murdered are 1:30. A headline from Tuesday's NYT stated that: "Prison spending outpaces all but Medicaid: One in every 31 adults, or 7.3 million Americans, is in prison, on parole or probation, at a cost to the states of \$47 billion in 2008"

Now that I've got your attention directed to the magnitude of the problem, let's see if prevention makes dollars and sense. I spell sense S-E-N-S-E. Violence prevention programs save at least \$7 for every \$1 spent (and probably a lot more). Now that sounds like a very profitable investment. However, of every \$1 spent on issues related to violence only 6 cents is spent on prevention and the remaining money is spent on the reaction to violence such as jails. Statistics show that a high school graduate will earn

and pay taxes on \$300,000 more than a high-school dropout. My message is that violence prevention does not actually cost us money because it ultimately saves us money!

So let's talk about preventing violence and saving some money. Did you know that 80% of inmates are functionally illiterate? Research has shown that children who do not read on grade level by 3rd grade have a much, much higher rate of becoming felons. We also know that the earlier a youth drops out of school, the more likely he is to become a criminal. The implications are clear: literacy has a profound impact on the individual and on our community. I may not be a rocket scientist, but it's obvious that the best way to prevent violence is to give our youth the educational tools they need to read and be productive and not a burden on society or worse, a criminal.

Last year, I informed you that the Institute began a 3 year commitment of a quarter of a million dollars to develop an innovative literacy education website. This website has been designed to put the best that we know from research into daily use by elementary school teachers nationwide.

We know that the children who are likely to fail in school usually come from homes that do not provide them with the level of educational support that they need to be successful. Evidence shows that Hispanic and African American children are particularly at risk. They fail because of poverty related conditions and not due to their ethnic backgrounds.

Therefore, reading teachers in early primary school classrooms have a major role in determining their students' future. If their students can learn to read and write by the end of third grade, they will likely be well on their way to a

successful, productive path in their lives. If they cannot, these at-risk children are all virtually doomed to fail in school, to drop out early and to follow a descending path that often leads to a life of crime.

The website will provide an unparalleled resource for educators featuring many video and other examples of outstanding Hispanic and African American teachers demonstrating and discussing evidence-based strategies that have been proven to be successful. It is designed to have a direct, practical impact on the quality of literacy education in the classroom.

Development of this unique site is well underway. There are already over 100 recipes for literacy success that have been generated by Dr. Dale Willows, an internationally acclaimed educator and member of the Institute's Scientific Board who is the creator of this website. This spring, she will return to Miami to film Hispanic master teachers and students at Hialeah Elementary School. Using a grant from the Melissa Institute, Dale has previously applied her methods to transform this school from an F to an A-rated one.

Knowing that the emotional scars from exposure to trauma can often cause deeper and more devastating pain than the physical scars brings me to the subject of our most recent initiative. Through the efforts of our scientific director, Dr. Don Meichenbaum, the Institute has become an early, active participant in recognizing and treating the post traumatic stress disorder found in our returning veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Don recently made powerful, informative presentations to capacity audiences of health care providers at the Miami and West Palm VA Hospital. Don is now

in the midst of piloting a national program with the Department of Defense to prevent PTSD, suicide, domestic violence, etc. in our returning veterans.

There are many other programs in which the Institute is involved. They are enumerated in the 2009 Community Report which is on your tables.

Finally, let's return to the theme of hope. Two weeks ago today, our family was blessed by the birth of our grandson. His birth gives me another impassioned reason to look forward with hope. Incorporated within the fiber of the Institute's work is the drumbeat of hope. Our conferences, consultations, training programs and websites provide hope and information to a multitude of professionals locally and worldwide. These violence prevention professionals, in turn, provide hope to affect the lives of scores of people who are the most needy and underserved in our society. In a larger sense, as I can personally attest, violence prevention by its ripple effect is in everyone's best interest.

I have good news and bad news about the donations that sustain the Institute in its mission. The good news is that there is enough money to pay for violence prevention that we all desperately need. The bad news is that some of it is still in your pocket. Each individual can make a difference, so please invest in a meaningful way. You can start by bidding on the items in tonight's auction which will support the literacy website. Your investment will pay off handsomely in our children's and grandchildren's collective future. In these times, it just may be the best investment that you can make.