

Why the Health and Success of African Nova Scotian Youth is  
Critical to the Future of Nova Scotian; and What You Should do About it.

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For those of you who don't know me, I should give you a few words of introduction. I'm Robert Wright and geographically, I'm from Halifax (though you may have guessed from my last name, that my people are from Beechville). In fact, like, many of us, I can trace my roots to more than one Black community in Nova Scotia. My mother Dorothy, was born and spent her childhood in Beechville, but my father, John Drummond was from Cherry Brook. Even further I could add that my mother's mother, was a Willis, and her mother was Lyde Downey, so yes, we're all related after a fashion.

Professionally, you should know that I'm a social worker and I've worked in this field for over twenty years. First in anti-poverty organizations and as a student support worker then as a front line child protection worker. Later, I worked as a race relations coordinator for the Dartmouth School board and as a correctional mental health specialist. This was probably one of my most interesting jobs. I did assessments and mental health treatment at the Washington State Penitentiary in the unit that housed mentally disordered, protective custody and death row inmates.

Over the last thirteen years, I've spent most of my time in administration as a Director of Child Welfare and most recently as the Executive Director of the Provincial Child and Youth Strategy. So that's all about me.

I have agreed to speak to you at the beginning of the GREATNESS OF YOU(TH) CONFERENCE, but I'm sure you don't want to hear from me for a full hour. Let me suggest that we spilt the difference. I'll speak for about half of this time and leave time at the end for questions.

So back to my topic: Why the health and success of African Nova Scotian youth is critical to the future of Nova Scotia, and what you should do about it. First lets talk about youth. In my view, and some other social scientists would agree with me, the youthful years are the most dynamic and culturally important years of the human life span. We should recognize that youth (and for arguments sake, lets say the years between 13 and 25 or 30) are the years when people have the capacity for cultural innovation.

Think about it. Children's culture has not changed in hundreds of years. The songs children sing when skipping rope today are the same songs that children played 200 years ago. Hide and seek, tag, you name it, the games of childhood are the games that have been played for generations. Children's culture does not change.

Similarly, the musical tastes, political views and fashion choices of most older people you know were formed around the time they were twenty-five or thirty and haven't changed since. The culture of adults is stable and unchanging. Some would say fixed. It is only during the youth and young adult years that our brains and our ideas about the world are sufficiently mature to be enthusiastically and intellectually engaged and at the same time open enough to change that you can perceive and even create something new. It is for this reason that all of the world's great technical and social innovators emerged during these years. From Bill Gates who started work debugging code after he was caught hacking at 15 to Quincy Jones whose revolutionary career as a music innovator was well under way by the time he was 23 or 24. This is because of the neurological and social capacity that exists in youth that exists at no other time in our life span.

The second thing about youth that is so powerful and somewhat related is the capacity of young people to be honest, to see unfairness wherever it exists, and to be moved by great ambition to change what they see. Who hasn't heard a young person cry in outrage "BUT THAT'S NOT FAIR!" Unburdened by the cynicism that comes with age, young people see wrong and do not accept it as "the way things are." This is why all the world's great revolutionaries were young people. Joan of Arc, Fidel Castro, Martin Luther King Junior, all demonstrated their call to fundamentally change the state of oppression of their people while still young and were leaders of revolutionary activity before they were thirty. Without question the capacities to innovate and to imagine a better more just world are almost wholly held by youth.

So that is a bit of a social science overview of why the youthful years are so important to our society. Without these youthful characteristics at work in our society the culture would be stagnant and there would be little movement towards justice. But what about African Nova Scotian youth? What makes them so special at this point in our history? Again, two things: Nova Scotia Demographics and the reality of Globalization.

Without question, the greatest challenge facing Nova Scotia today is demographics. The Province of Nova Scotia is experiencing a shrinking population and an aging population. These two factors are resulting in a dramatic projected reduction in the size of the workforce in Nova Scotia. There are people in Government even today who are trying to figure out who is going to work to sustain the Nova Scotian economy and to look after all the old people?

Well, African Nova Scotians are one of the few populations in Nova Scotia that are not in sharp decline. African Nova Scotians along with our Mi'Kmaq and recently immigrated brothers and sisters, are among the only peoples that are still experiencing population increases or at least are holding their own. We are also among the province's greatest untapped resources when it comes to the economy as well, in part because of our systematic exclusion from it thus far and as a result of our apparent rejection of the elements of the current economic structures. I predict that it will not be long before African Nova Scotian young people will be recruited hard by the provincial government to stay in Nova Scotia to stabilize the population and the economy of this province and ensure the province's future.

The second major reason why I think African Nova Scotian youth will hold a unique role in Nova Scotia's future is because of the reality of Globalization. Whether you are talking about world food security, global warming, terrorism or global trade and economics the stabilization and security of local communities is going to depend on people who have the capacity to understand and think about solutions on a global scale. This requires the capacity to see things from multiple perspectives and the ability to understand people who are different than you. In short it requires skills in cultural competence.

African Nova Scotian youth and other people of colour have grown up in one culture and out of necessity, have learned to function in a radically different one. This is the beginning of cultural competence. Additionally, our status as African Canadians gives us an affinity for and natural connection to Africa. We are by birth and identity internationalists even before we journey outside of Canada. This has currency in the world, a currency and connection that we should begin to exploit to the benefit of the global community.

So we are African Nova Scotian Youth and we are well positioned by virtue of youthful capacity for innovation and social change, and by our capacity and affinity for engaging in the global nature of our local challenges. So what are we going to do about it? You might notice that I have not taken this time to bring you simple and simplistic messages: Stay in school, don't do drugs, stop the violence . . . . Don't get me wrong, I believe all of those things. But the problem I see is this: These messages are too small. When we

begin to see and to take up the larger role that God Himself has positioned for us to take up, we will find the strength and will to achieve in an inherently racist education system at the same time that we are revolutionizing it to be more inclusive; we will begin to see and reject the enslaving economic, moral, and health consequences of the drug trade at the same time that we revolutionize the foundation of the Nova Scotia economy to make proper space for us in it; and we will reject the interpersonal violence that plagues our communities at the same time that we are demanding peace and true justice both at home and across the globe.

I believe in the greatness of youth.

It is only the youth who can imagine the change.

It is only youth who can champion the change.

I plead with those of you still young enough to still wield this power. Do not leave the work for your children to do. This Planet may not have that much time.

Thank you.