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COMMENTARY

THE CAPSTONE

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Cheek's lasting legacy at Howard will benefit future generations well into the next century.



**The Cheek Legacy
And Other Business**

By Earl G. Graves

Since its very first issue 19 years ago, *Black Enterprise* magazine has been filled with stunning achievements of Howard graduates.

With only a fraction of the resources that other nationally prominent, first class universities enjoy, Howard has turned out class after class of graduates who have pioneered advances in their many fields of endeavor.

Just one example says it all. Last year when *Black Enterprise* ran a feature of the 15 top Black doctors in America, five of them were graduates of Howard. Three important staff positions at *Black Enterprise* are filled by Howard University graduates. I'm very proud of the contributions made by Mrs. Patricia Traylor, our circulation director; Gregory Mays, our national advertising manager; and Deatra Perkins, one of our advertising account executives.

Under the leadership of James Cheek, Howard University has enjoyed two decades of tremendous growth and stunning success. When he began his vocation as chief executive of Howard, the annual budget was about \$43 million. Today it is close to \$500 million. Two decades ago, there were eleven schools and colleges at Howard. Today there are 18. When James Cheek accepted the mantle of leadership, Howard had one major research institute. Today there are nine major institutes and research centers.

The list of crucial facilities built and staffed during his tenure would take me too long to read. But the most important statistic that sums up his era is the fact that as many degrees have been awarded under the leadership of James Cheek as Howard awarded in an entire century before his arrival.

And I must note that during Jim's tenure there has been a marked improvement in your football program.

And what your team has done to my alma mater, Morgan State, over the past few years has been embarrassing.

We all know Jim Cheek's era at Howard is coming to an end as he has decided to seek new opportunities. But his lasting legacy at Howard will benefit future generations well into the next century.

As one era comes to an end, another begins. I'm happy to say I have accepted the flattering offers from both James Cheek and John Jacob, the chairman of the Board of Trustees, to officially become a member of the Howard University Board of Trustees.

At first, I wondered where I would find the time to give my all as a Howard trustee. But when I discovered that it wasn't only James Cheek and John Jacob who wanted me—when I learned that the students had asked me to serve, I had no choice but to make time.

Today I officially welcome the Class of 1989 to a new era of opportunity. More than three decades ago when I stood where you are today, I had three basic career choices: the Army, the Social Security Administration or teaching. I chose the Army and became a second lieutenant in the Paratroopers.

Armed with the knowledge and skills you bring with you from this citadel of excellence [Howard], the choices you have before you know no boundaries. The pages of the magazine I publish each month are filled with stories about how African American men and women are forging new trails of success in every possible type of business situation.

Yes, it is still harder for Americans who happen to be Black. You know, as well as I, that this has always been true.

As I have said to Howard audiences

before, despite our people's lack of material riches, we were never really poor. Our families earned and preserved the special gift of excellence and the unique sense of self-esteem which comes from our history of continuous achievement in the face of insidious discrimination and persecution.

Your generation will build more wealth, to pass to future generations of Black Americans than previous generations could imagine. Your generation will see African American C.E.O.'s of major multinational companies. Your generation will see a *Black Enterprise* 500 or, even better, a multinational 500 in which Black-owned businesses are commonplace. You will see many more African Americans serve as governors—perhaps beginning with Howard alumnus Lt. Gov. L. Douglas Wilder, who is currently running for governor of Virginia. You will see U.S. senators and African Americans in key administration positions such as secretary of the treasury, attorney general, secretary of state and secretary of defense.

But, if I talked only about those of us fortunate enough to wear caps and gowns today, I would be telling only half the truth.

The reality of Black America today is a tale of two worlds. The best of times await those of you who will be able to take advantage of the unprecedented opportunity which awaits outside the doors of Howard.

But for countless other African Americans trapped in the absence of opportunity, it continues to be the worst of times. If you think I am exaggerating with this bit of plagiarism from Dickens, I ask you to think again.

Think of record percentages of high school dropouts who will never know the satisfaction of any graduation. We are entering an age in which there will

be more entry level opportunities for minorities and women in America than ever before. As American industry becomes high tech and competes more effectively in a truly global marketplace, experts tell us there will be entry level jobs in the next two decades for nearly every American with the necessary skills and education. But therein is the rub.

Our urban public schools are not preparing a high percentage of those who do earn high school diplomas for either college or entry level jobs.

While the private sector continues to improve, public services, especially in large cities, have not begun to meet the needs of those who face the worst of times.

Walk the streets of New York City, my hometown, on any late night and you will see a Black homeless population to rival any scene in a Dickens' novel. Meanwhile, the international merchants of death have unlocked the secrets of human brain chemistry with instantly addictive crack and created a plague in America that is tearing apart the fabric of our society, causing more death and destruction than any other drug in human history.

All the social programs that were supposed to help those who need it the most have been so grossly underfunded and strapped with senseless bureaucratic regulations that they have simply not worked for far too many of our people.

There's no doubt that there is an underclass in America based on the economic effects of racism. And, if current trends continue, it will soon be based as much on the absence of human concern as the absence of educational and economic opportunity.

It is also true that there, but for the grace of God, go you or I.

I, for one, believe that it is also true that God's grace comes through people. In my case—as in most of yours—it was the tremendous sacrifices of my parents that gave me the opportunity to choose a path that would lead me here today.

But, no matter how hard they struggled for my opportunity to have a future, I know that there would not be a *Black Enterprise* magazine today if it were not for all those who struggled for equal opportunity in America before me.

If it were not for people such as Rosa Parks and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, Ralph Bunch and so many others who gave their lives to building the bridges over which we have been fortunate enough to cross, neither you nor I would be wearing caps and gowns on this great day.

You see, we cannot forget the past until the past is over for everyone who happens to be Black in America. We cannot forget the past until there is

Yes, it is still harder for Americans who happen to be Black . . . This has always been true.

one reality for African Americans. The reality of equal opportunity based on ability and fortune and *not* on the color of human skin.

Thank God, you and I have been privileged to find our way out of the other Black America. Thank God millions of other African Americans have also beat nearly impossible odds to gain achievement and some measure of financial success in their lives. Without each other, who would reach back and build bridges from one world to the other?

The new bridges we must build will have to be taller and stronger than ever before because we have yet to overcome the most formidable barriers we still have before we can see our dreams of equal economic opportunity for all come true.

These final barriers to equal opportunity are based on the diabolic part of human nature which seems to make it necessary for one group of people to feel superior to—and at the same time threatened by—another. It is this base parochial quality of human nature that is not only the cause of racism, but also has caused most of the wars in human history.

It is true that the deep roots of racism have lost much of their hold, but they are still strong enough to de-

fine the limits of our equality and uphold the final barriers we must dismantle.

The roots of racism, for example, were profoundly present in the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down the City of Richmond's minority set-aside program. I know this decision was limited and that many people feel we can get around it by more carefully documenting the economic effects of racism in our communities.

But while all the lawyers are arguing about what it means, I can tell you this: It is a crucial step backward, a giant step toward further economic discrimination based on race.

For the highest court in America to rule that the economic effect of racial discrimination must be documented, in a way apparently only a narrow majority of Supreme Court justices understand, is the same as telling someone he must prove a summer sun is too hot before he can stand in the shade. It is as absurd as ruling that we must prove that God exists before we can pray, or that we must document the fact that people can starve from hunger before we are allowed to feed them.

The roots of racism in America's heart tell our nation's power brokers they must still draw lines which they dare us to cross.

Far too many Americans persist in taking for granted a separate status for citizens who happen to be Black. They still think of African Americans trapped in the economic pain of racial discrimination as the rule, while those of us who have attained some measure of success in our lives continue to be thought of as the exception.

I have said all of this not to dampen the enthusiasm of your special day. I discuss the largest challenge facing our people and our nation because I have tremendous confidence in your ability, not only to succeed in your careers, but in forging paths of hope and opportunity for other African Americans.

What is exactly expected of you?

How are you going to find the time and energy to pursue your professional careers, raise families, find enough leisure time to enjoy the better things in life you're certain to earn and

still build new bridges and forge new paths for other Black Americans?

Protesting the lack of economic opportunity, in itself, won't be enough. Protesting certainly has its place. When I was a student at Morgan State, we protested at a local movie theater which made us sit in the balcony, and a store which required Blacks buy clothing just because we tried it on. We won. Student protests began the civil rights movement. Student protests kept America focused on ways to pressure South Africa to end its terrible oppression. And your protests at Howard this year made their point and began a movement which has spread to the City University of New York and other college campuses around the nation.

But once you leave here, you will find better and more effective ways than public protests to influence public and corporate policy. The economic effects of racism that we must overcome today do not offer a national television audience—the high drama of a "Bull" Connor-type bigotry to awaken the conscience of the nation.

Let me give you some examples. When a Japanese official made racist statements about African Americans last year, and later Japanese businesses further insulted us by merchandising terribly racist symbols of our people, John Jacob and I, and other concerned individuals, were able to take out full page national ads to call attention to the travesty.

Today, John Jacob and I are in the process of meeting with top Japanese officials to do our best to make certain that public displays of racism from Japan never again occur.

A few years ago, I pointed out to your esteemed chairman of the Board of Trustees how major hotel chains refused to advertise in minority publications, use minority professional services such as law and accounting firms and hire Blacks in their executive suites. That prompted Mr. Jacob to visit the chairman of the nation's largest hotel chain. His message was clear: Either you change your policies or you will lose our business. Today those policies are beginning to change.

I think it is incumbent upon each of you, as Black American consumers, to pay attention to which companies

do and which companies do not advertise in Black-owned media. Those companies that don't advertise are indeed sending a message to us. And that message is: They don't really care about you. They are taking you for granted. However, when you become aware of the advertising practices of these companies and begin to make your purchases accordingly, you will send a very special and powerful message to those who take our business for granted.

The new bridges we must build will have to be taller and stronger than ever before . . .

I have always said that it is not a crime to earn a lot of money. I hope all of you will earn enough to invest in stocks and bonds, drive luxury autos, wear the very best clothing, and live in homes you dream of today.

And I have qualified that by saying, if you make that much money, you have to give something back. And, I know that you will share whatever you earn in the future with this university—whether it is \$10 or \$10,000—and with the organizations which built the

bridges for us, such as the Urban League, the NAACP, SCLC, UNCF and Operation PUSH.

But much more is expected of you than just writing checks. Your personal involvement is required. Money can buy a lot. But it can't buy what one human being can give to another. It can't touch the lives of those trapped without hope as effectively as you can.

Whether you get involved in your local Urban Leagues, or Scouts or Boys Clubs or schools or youth programs or in helping a small Black-owned business grow and expand, if each member of your generation would bring hope and inspiration and self-confidence to the life of one other Black American, we would soon double the size of the world in which we are fortunate enough to live. □

The above, by Earl Graves, president of Earl G. Graves Ltd. and publisher of Black Enterprise magazine, was excerpted from his commencement address at Howard University on May 13, 1989.