

## The Invisible Men



Written by RON MATUS | Tuesday, 25 October 2005

Times researchers Kitty Bennett and Carolyn Edds and staff writer Matthew Waite contributed to this report. Ron Matus can be reached at 727 893-8873 or [matus@sptimes.com](mailto:matus@sptimes.com)

They wheel him into the student union on a dolly, a black man tied up, masked and clad in combat boots. Once set free, he scowls and stomps, to the delight of hundreds of black students who have gathered to watch.

His words silence them: "I GOT A STORY TO TELL!"

On a chilly day in Tallahassee, Adekunle Adegbemi is being initiated into a black fraternity at predominantly white Florida State University. Before a dozen Omega Psi Phi members sweat through dance steps and the DJ cranks Snoop Dogg, Adegbemi serves up a twist: a classic poem.

Step show abruptly morphs into morality play:

In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor cried aloud.

Under the bludgeonings of chance

My head is bloody, but unbowed. The poem, a defiant ode to never giving up, was written by a 19th century Englishman crippled by tuberculosis. But Adegbemi (pronounced a-DAY-bay-me) breathes fresh pain into old words.

Black men know why he's shouting.

At virtually every crack in the education pipeline, black males are falling through at rates higher than other groups.

They are more likely to be placed in special education programs, to score poorly on standardized tests, to be suspended or expelled. Fewer than half will graduate with traditional diplomas. Barely a third will go to college. Barely a third of them will earn degrees.

Meanwhile, black females are making strides.

The result: a decidedly male tilt to the achievement gap, the gulf in academic performance that separates black and white students across the United States.

That tilt is most obvious on college campuses. At nine of Florida's 11 public universities, black women outnumber black men 2-to-1.

"If you're a college-educated black woman, I don't think you're looking forward to marrying someone who went to high school and works at the 7-11," says Patricia Stith, who is black and the former director of retention studies at FSU. But "that's where we're headed."

The trend isn't new. But it's rarely discussed.

Many whites balk at the notion that racism has something to do with the numbers. And some blacks fear that talk of academic failings will put flesh on ugly stereotypes.

"The young women who come through this program are often incredibly dedicated and work extremely hard," says Dana Peterson, a white man who runs a retention program for at-risk students at the University of Florida.

And the young men?

Peterson won't say: "I'm afraid it might come out wrong."

Florida has extra reason to worry. It has 320,000 school-age black males, more than any other state. Their dropout rate is among the worst in the nation. And so far, Gov. Jeb Bush's intense focus on reading and testing has yielded dramatic progress among black males in lower grades - and a stunning lack of it in high school.

Explanations don't come easy. Parents get some of the blame. So does an overwhelmingly white teacher corps. Some point to a lack of positive role models for black males. Some to the legacy of slavery, and to racism, real and perceived.

One academic theory holds that young black males are waging a countercultural revolution, with schools a bastion of the old regime.

Mainstream white culture has branded them. So black males have created their own world to salvage their pride, says Janet Mancini Billson, a sociologist who has written extensively about the coping strategies of minority men and women.

"What helps young people to get good grades is to be a conformist," Billson says. "But these boys don't want to be a conformist."

It's no stretch to say America hasn't been kind to black women, either, yet they persist.

Billson says they have to: They're mothers.

"Men get depressed," she says. "Women get up and change the diaper."

DeJaundre "Dre" Meekins calls himself and his cousin, Adegbemi, "the fish that got away."

On Chicago's south side, hooks were everywhere. Drug dealing was rampant. Some friends joined gangs and ended up in jail. A few went to college but didn't graduate.

Add palm trees, and their neighborhood could be in Tampa or St.Petersburg.

"When you're in the 'hood, you don't look at school as the way out," says Meekins, a 24-year-old with a round face and bittersweet laugh.

Somehow, he and his cousin did. Now they are seniors at FSU, two of 1,500 black men at a school with 39,000 students.

Over the past two decades, the percentage of young black men in college has increased, from 30 percent to 37 percent. But during the same period, the rate for black women has climbed twice as fast.

Meekins and Adegbemi say they know why black males are not keeping pace.

In some black neighborhoods, sports, music and drug dealing are considered paths to a good life. Many black males don't have fathers or role models to guide them, but their TV sets are blanketed with athletes driving tricked-out Hummers and rap stars chugging Courvoisier.

College? Tough, expensive and no guarantee, many black males are told. Get a government job or something blue collar.

"No one says, 'It'll be greater later,' " Meekins says.

"You never hear, 'Go be a physicist,' " says Adegbemi.

In a recent study of low-income black and Latino youth in New York City, Harvard sociologist Prudence L. Carter found the majority of the boys aspired to be athletes and entertainers, while the girls wanted to be lawyers and doctors.

Black males want success and power and toys just like white males. But after being shut out of the ivory tower and corporate boardroom for so long, they're cruising other avenues, says Carter, who is black.

In rap stars and athletes, they see strong black men who got rich and famous

without a traditional education. That route "turns the notion of the American dream on its head," Carter says.

But for those denied the dream, it makes sense.

In Pinellas County schools, 1 in 3 black boys are classified as special education students, while 1 in 100 are considered gifted.

The corresponding rates for white boys: 1 in 5, and 1 in 16.

Look at almost any academic indicator and black males are doing worse than white males.

They're on the losing end of the gender gap, too.

By most academic measures, girls have surpassed boys, a recent but growing phenomenon that slices across all racial lines but cuts deepest among blacks. Some researchers suggest that in earlier grades, girls are better prepared to learn, with superior reading, communication and social skills.

In the case of black males, some say a teaching force dominated by white women also hurts.

"Many black boys, by the time they are in third grade, have not seen any black males in their educational experiences. Not a one," says Rep. Danny Davis, a black Illinois Democrat who has been holding forums on black males around the country. "They decide this education business is not really for them."

But the gender gap is only a partial explanation.

To measure identification with academics, North Carolina State University sociologist Jason Osborne correlated student grades and self-esteem over a 30-year period. The rates have remained fairly steady among white males and white females and have soared among black females.

With black males, the correlation plummets.

Yet black males continue to feel good about themselves, Osborne found.

"It's like if I bake a quiche and it comes out terrible. It doesn't matter," says Osborne, who is white. "I don't identify myself with quiche making."

A few years ago, Stanford University psychologist Claude Steele gave two groups of black and white Stanford sophomores the same 30-minute verbal test.

He told one group the test was just a lab exercise, and did not rate intelligence.

He told the other it was a high-stakes measure of ability.

Black students who got the first set of instructions did just as well as their white counterparts.

Those who got the second set scored dramatically worse.

In a follow-up experiment, Steele tested white males.

Given a math test without comment, they did well.

But when told beforehand that Asians routinely did better on the test - playing on the stereotype of Asians as math wizards - their scores dropped.

**Conclusion: Stereotypes matter more than we think.**

Steele argues that the weight of negative stereotypes can drive black students to botch academics, because they fear they will fail and live up to the image. It's a coping strategy that backfires.

"Spotlight anxiety" hurts the best students the most, says Steele, whose findings call into question the advice black families often give their children - to work twice as hard to disprove the stereotype.

That is "precisely what these students are trying to do," Steele, who is black, wrote in an article for Atlantic Monthly magazine. "Black students taking the test under stereotype threat seemed to be trying too hard rather than not hard enough. They re-read the questions, re-read the multiple choices, re-checked their answers . . ."

Steele did not test his theory along gender lines, but such research is under way.

"I suspect," Steele writes in an e-mail, "that the more virulent the stereotypes, the more powerful their effects."

Translation: The phenomenon probably affects black males more.

In the Atlantic Monthly article, Steele noted a test that found the blood pressure of black students performing under stereotype threat was higher than for those not under threat, and for white students.

He recalled the legend of John Henry, a former slave who races a steam drill to see which one can dig holes faster.

John Henry wins.

Then dies from exhaustion.

Adekunle Adegbemi took the long route to FSU.

The son of a taxi driver and a respiratory therapist, he played football at a predominantly white junior college in Minnesota but quit after one semester, broke and homesick.

Then he delivered packages for \$21 an hour, but felt empty.

"I've always been good at counseling," says the 27-year-old, whose gentle voice belies a defensive back's physique. "Kids can see, 'He came off the block. He wasn't a genius . . . He's just a regular person who tried hard and made it.' "

Adegbemi hasn't made it yet. His grades are so-so, a B and two C's last semester.

And the odds are against him.

The six-year graduation rate for black men in the United States last year was 34 percent, compared to 56 percent for white men, 42 percent for Hispanic men and 45 percent for black women, according to a report from the Education Trust.

Even in college, black men struggle more.

Thirty-one percent of black men need remedial reading in college, a rate four times as high as white men and eight points higher than black women. Few higher education indicators are better predictors of failure: According to federal data, only 16 percent of students who take remedial reading go on to earn bachelor's degrees.

Higher education researcher William Harvey notes a link between academic performance and hours at a job, and suggests black men in college work more than other groups, including black women. Too often, they must support themselves and contribute to families back home.

"It's the breadwinner syndrome," says Harvey, who is black.

Morehouse College sociology professor Obie Clayton cites another drag: Isolation.

Surrounded by white faces, some black men feel too self-conscious to ask questions in class or approach their professors for guidance, says Clayton, who is black. Some cocoon themselves into social clubs. Grades sink.

"You become invisible, like the Invisible Man," Clayton says, referring to the classic 1952 novel about a black man's search for identity.

Not long after they moved into their apartment, Meekins and Adegbemi received a CD from an anonymous mailer. It was a compilation of songs by white supremacist musicians. Meekins mentions the CD in a paper he wrote for a social problems class.

He and his cousin, he writes, "wake every morning in a foreign land."

We see no familiar faces on this side of town. The students drive by us as if we couldn't possibly attend their big white institution ...

There aren't any housing complexes near FSU where blacks are a majority. There isn't a quality place in Tallahassee that is focused on the black population ...

Things as simple as this will affect your psyche ...

It will make you think every day that this world, this school, just was not meant for you.

Jenny Walker's mother raised three daughters by herself, making ends meet by working two full-time shifts as a home health aide. Sometimes, Walker wouldn't see her mother for days.

But Mom never lost her easy smile.

"It's like all this working didn't drain her life from her," says Walker, 19, a nursing major at the University of Florida. "I think my mom was like, 'I need to do this.' She knew she had to find a way to take care of her family."

While many black men lack positive male role models, black females have plenty of women to look to for strength: their moms.

That's a common theory for why black women are outpacing black men.

Here's another: Black women are better at rolling with the punches.

"If a girl comes home and says, 'I got into a fight,' " she's chastised, says Walker, who has five half-brothers. "With a boy, it's like, 'Did you win?' "

Angie Richardson sees it all the time. Black students face many of the same hurdles in college, but while black men often stew, "the females simply work through it," says Richardson, who is black and directs FSU's Center for Retention

and Academic Support.

Some observers say lopsided demographics have forced black women to adjust.

At FSU, the six-year graduation rate for black women in 2003 was 66 percent, above the 63 percent rate for the student body as a whole and second, by a hair, to white women.

The rate for black men was 53 percent.

That gap says something about black women's outlooks on the future, says Patricia Stith, FSU's former retention director. Black women are grinding through college with more purpose because they know "they're going to have to take care of themselves," she says.

The college dating scene offers a sign of things to come. Given persistent taboos against interracial dating, black co-eds say they're finding fewer opportunities for relationships.

"There's a lot of black women here, really smart, really pretty," says Shari McLean, 21, a black public relations major at UF, which has 2,300 black women and 1,300 black men. "And they have no one."

Some community groups in Florida strive to keep black males away from the streets. Some schools cultivate mentors. Some colleges offer support services.

On some Fridays, St. Petersburg College administrator Davie Gill can be found off campus, randomly searching for black male recruits.

"It's an under-the-tree thing," says Gill, who is black and an adviser to the college's Brother to Brother retention program. "I go up to them and talk to them and say, 'Are you aware of the opportunities you have?'"

There are many people like Gill in Florida. But there is no coordinated effort, no consensus on approach and virtually no public discussion.

State education leaders point to Gov. Bush's initiatives, which they say are lifting all students.

Reading scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test show, to some extent, they are right.

In 1999, 80 percent of black male fourth-graders were not reading at grade level, twice the rate of white males. By 2004, those numbers had improved markedly, to 52 percent, and the gap with white males had narrowed by 10 points.

But can those gains be sustained as the students get older?

In 1999, 91 percent of black male 10th-graders weren't reading at grade level.

Five years later, 90 percent weren't.

Donnie Garner is president of FSU's Black Student Union and FSU's most recent Homecoming Chief. He's a sociology major and a regular on the Honor Roll. He plans to be a lawyer.

His younger brother, on the other hand, was recently jailed for violating probation.

In high school, he punched a principal.

"He had the same opportunities," says Garner, 21. But "he embraced the street life."

Many young black males, including those from middle class families, walk a cultural tightrope, says Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County and co-author of a book about raising black males. They worry that if they change too much to make it academically, they will lose touch with their roots and their friends.

Hrabowski, who is black, recalls a conversation he had with graduate students he recruited to UMBC, which is recognized nationally for producing black male scientists.

"I've had to say to them, 'Why are you acting as if you're out on the street talking to your boys?'"

Jacquelyn Small says the street consumed her nephew, Cory Ware.

Ware, 23, was an unassuming student at St. Petersburg College and a member of Brother to Brother. In late January, he was on the Gibbs campus, picking up a new textbook.

A few days later, his body was found in the back of his car, behind a vacant house in south St. Petersburg. He had been shot multiple times.

Small says Ware's father, a high school teacher, and his mother, an insurance company employee, didn't realize their son had a street name until after his death.

Ware "led a double life," she says, without offering specifics.

At Ware's wake, 200 people packed a funeral home, some in suits, others in baggy jeans. Another St. Petersburg College student and Brother to Brother member, Shawn Thomas, served as minister.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I'm tired of going to my homeboys'funerals."

In the crowd, dozens of mourners wore memorials on specially printed T-shirts.

The shirts said, "R.I.P. C-Low."

In the FSU student union, the fraternity step show comes to an end.

Adegbemi, sweaty but happy, accepts a line of hugs, then follows his new brothers to a private moment at FSU's "Integration" statue, which honors the school's first black students.

Today, he's on top of the world. But tomorrow, the "bludgeonings of chance" will resume in his Race and Ethnicity class.

There are 60 students enrolled.

He is the only black man.

Times researchers Kitty Bennett and Carolyn Edds and staff writer Matthew Waite contributed to this report. Ron Matus can be reached at 727 893-8873 or [matus@sptimes.com](mailto:matus@sptimes.com)