OPENING
Dr. Mary Heltsley, Dean
College of Home Economics
University of Minnesota

Hello. We are pleased that you are here this afternoon. I'm Mary Heltsley and I'm Dean of the College of Home Economics.

The first thing that we will do today is talk a little bit about the Gisela Konopka Lectureship. Paying tribute to Gisela Konopka is one of the most pleasant aspects of being Dean. The Gisela Konopka Lectureship Fund was established in her honor at the time of her retirement. Gisela was Director of the Center for Youth Development and Research and Professor in the School of Social Work. She maintains close connection with the University through her continuing professional activities and the Annual Konopka Lectureship, which is sponsored by the Center for Youth Development and Research.

Gisela is a many-faceted individual, having a thorough appreciation of literature and the arts. It is through these media that she frequently reaches the most troubled adolescents and begins the healing process. Examples of her compassion, sensitivity, love, spunk, and determination are evident in her new book, *Courage and Love*. She also describes the magnitude and the intensity of the relationship that she shared with her husband, Paul. This love aided her in surviving the torment of the Nazis and in understanding youth regardless of their generation.

I count it a blessing to know Gisela. Whether it's having Saturday morning breakfast on her porch while watching a bird build a nest nearby, reading one of her treatises on an academic topic which is dear to her, having a heated discussion on the telephone, exchanging philosophical discussions about the meaning of life, or to talk into my church downtown Minneapolis and unexpectedly see Paul's “Carving of Hands” in the sanctuary, that's all Gisela!

Gisela, either directly or indirectly, you have had a great influence on the lives of many grown people in Minnesota and around the world. We hope that we can show the same kind and degree of love and courage that you have shown. We salute you, Gisela Konopka, and we honor you with this lectureship in your name. Gisela, would you stand?

Dr. Josie Johnson is a Senior Fellow in the College of Education at the University of Minnesota. Josie cares deeply about youth and has expressed that concern by being political most of her life. She is a role model of how individuals can make a difference. Her lists of being at the forefront of social change are great: A black female Regent of the University of Minnesota, taught black family classes before they were in vogue, a fund-raiser for Fisk University, liaison for city government in the black community, a civil rights lobbyist, member of the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Youth Symphony, League of Women Voters, and on and on. I want to welcome Josie to the stage and she will introduce our speaker for today.

INTRODUCTION
Dr. Josie Johnson, Senior Fellow
College of Education
University of Minnesota

Good afternoon. I am honored to have this opportunity given to me to introduce Dr. Andrew Billingsley to you this afternoon. Dr. Billingsley is Professor and Chair, Department of Family and Community Development at the University of Maryland, College Park. I have known Dr. Billingsley and Dr. Konopka for over 20 years. Each in their own way has had and continues to have a very significant influence on my life. Therefore, to participate in this afternoon’s session and to have an opportunity to recognize Drs. Konopka and Billingsley is a great joy to me.

You have in your program a synopsis of Dr. Billingsley’s accomplishments. What I would like to say to you in addition is that in the true standards and tradition of Gisela Konopka, Dr. Billingsley is a very productive scholar. He is soft spoken, but a powerful speaker; he is a humanitarian and a relentless researcher.

Before accepting the position with Maryland in 1985, Dr. Billingsley had shared much of his scholarship with institutions from coast to coast. He was serving as a visiting scholar at Berkeley and also at Fordham in New York. Before that he served as President and Professor of Sociology at Morgan State University in Baltimore. What the information does not tell you is that when Dr. Billingsley went to Morgan in 1975, Morgan was a college, a very distinguished college, preparing students to receive their bachelor’s degrees. By the time Dr. Billingsley left Morgan in 1984, Morgan had become a distinguished university beyond the bachelors, with research and graduate degrees.

Before that, he was at Howard, at Berkeley, and at other places with his skills in social welfare, social work, sociology, caring kinds of areas. He has demonstrated his curiosity about these areas in every field of his interest. In every place, Dr. Billingsley has been there and has been significant to his field. One of the greatest joys that a scholar receives is to be acknowledged and respected by your peers. Dr. Billingsley has received that also. He was among the ten
leading black sociologists selected by other sociologists, and among the top three, as cited among scholars in the Who’s Who Among Black Doctorates in Sociology.

He has published endlessly, including over 250 citations, and you can find him in any catalogue in the library under the area of family, children, welfare, all those issues that are so basic. His text that I used in my Black family class, and many of you in the field recommend as the text for yours, Black Families in White America, is being updated. Dr. Billingsley produced the first edition in 1968; he is publishing the second, updated edition, and it will be ready in less than six months, is my understanding. He is a clear contributor to the field; he is a scholar; he is a wonderful human being. It is my joy and pleasure to introduce to you at this moment: Dr. Andrew Billingsley

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
Dr. Andrew Billingsley, Ph.D.

Thank you very much, Dr. Johnson, for that marvelous introduction. I feel as though all I need do now is to make a few concluding remarks. I want to thank the Center for Youth Development and Research and the planning committee for the Konopka Lectures for inviting me here today and for making me feel so welcome, and indeed for providing such an inspiring setting for today’s program. Thanks to Gisela who began the process with a few people at dinner last night. The dinner provided fantastic intellectual stimulation. I hope some of it carries over to the lecture today. Thanks also to Josie Johnson and to Alice Dylan and to others who have shown me some of the things you are doing here in Minneapolis with families and children in a way that is consistent with my own concept of the broadness of the family. I found it all very inspiring. In fact I feel so rewarded by all these things that you don’t need to pay the $25,000 fee. You can save it until Ollie North comes to town. He needs the money more than I do.

All of us are here this afternoon because of the remarkable contributions to our understanding of youth and family life made by Dr. Gisela Konopka. Through her writings, her teaching, and the sheer force of her personality, she has taught us all the vital importance of strong family and institutional life in the development of children and youth. I am honored to be invited to give this 12th Annual Konopka Lecture.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIES IN A CHANGING SOCIETY: THE YOUTH CRISIS AND SOCIAL CHAOS

I wish to share with you some of my own understandings about the crisis facing African-American families and their youth. More specifically still, I will focus attention on the plight of African-American male youth.

In the course of my remarks, I will try to impart to you my conviction that the crisis in which today’s African-American youth are enmeshed is serious and crippling in the extreme. It is, however, a crisis not of their own making. It is a crisis born of the chaos in the larger society that is inflicted on these young people. Moreover, I will attempt to show that these young people—caught up in drugs, premature parenthood, school failure, crime, and incarceration—are not so much personal deviants, acting irrationally out of individual, personal, and psychological depravity of their own making.

When a group of black youth attacked, raped, and mutilated the body of an old black woman in Washington a few years ago, they were reflecting, in part, their personal and individual crises. They were also reflecting, in part, the fact that their families had failed them. Just as assuredly, however, they were reflecting the fact that their community and their society had failed them. They had been caught in that terrible vise between their legitimate aspirations to be somebody, which all share, and the absence of resources and supports to reach their potential by legitimate means.

And when a group of black and Hispanic youth attacked a white female jogger in Central Park at 10:00 p.m. on an evening in April 1989, they were victims of the same disease. They were all victims of a society that had abandoned them, left them to their own devices, robbed them of legitimate means to find selfhood, provided them with too many illegitimate means to strive for meaning in their lives. Their families, their communities, and their society collectively had abandoned them.

But of the three sources and levels of abandonment, it is the larger society that is the worst culprit. It is worst because it has more power and more resources than their communities and their families. It is the society that makes them all what they are and what they become. And what is society? It is the collective whole of the nation, its values, its culture, its priorities, its prejudices, and the manner in which its institutions work. Do these function well and equitably for all its members, or do they discriminate, serving some better than others on the basis of their race, their age, their gender, their family structure, their voting power, and their economic power? If it is the latter, then the behavior of so many low-income African-American youth is no more surprising or unpredictable than would be the case if you took a piece of fresh meat and left it out in the open air unprotected, uncared for, for several days, weeks, months, or years. It is my view, based on my own research, experience, and reasoning (controversial to be sure, but it is my view) that it follows as the night the day, that societal neglect and abuse lead inevitably to community, family, and individual neglect; and that such neglect leads to the aberrant behavior that we all abhor.

And who is responsible for this societal neglect and abuse? All of us are. True, some of us are more responsible than others. Those with more power, more status, more privileges, more discretion and freedom are more responsible for this predicament than are those with less. But in a democratic-oriented society we are all responsible. A society of people which, by voting and not voting, elects people to high office and entrusts them with making the laws and policies that govern that society are responsible for the behavior of those officials. The failure of our society to pursue justice and equity is a failure of democracy itself.

A society that turns its back on leaders such as Walter Mondale, Jimmy Carter, and Jesse Jackson and turns its government over to men such as Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Dan
Quayle is a society that does not take seriously a commitment to the common good. It is a society in chaos.

Let me hasten to add that I am not talking partisan politics. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a conservative Republican, but history shows that he was a truly decent man. A war hero, he was committed to peace and tranquility. And having fought so brilliantly for freedom from tyranny abroad, his instincts were on the side of freedom at home as well. So it was the conservative, Republican, do-nothing Eisenhower who sent federal troops into Little Rock to enforce the 1954 Supreme Court Decision outlawing segregation. And it was this same Eisenhower who appointed Earl Warren to be Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, which ushered in a new set of legal protections for the less powerful. And it was Eisenhower who presided over an unprecedented expansion of social security and social welfare programs. And more than all of that, it was he who warned us about the coming hegemony of the powerful Military-Industrial Complex that now rules supreme in the values and actions of our national government. It is hard to imagine recent political leadership taking such bold stands for justice and for the common good.

Now my thesis is not about political parties or political ideology. It is about political decency and courage, and commitment to the people. It is about personal greed and feeding the greed of personal associates and supporters; it is about reverse Robin Hoods who rob the national treasure that belongs to all of us and delivers it to the privileged, powerful, and the truly greedy at the expense of the truly needy.

Dr. James Comer has said that there is too much anxiety in our national life, which is causing young people to lose their way. And much of this is due to the absence of fundamental values of decency and compassion in our national leadership. But how did they get that way? And how did they get where they are today? I say that, as citizens in a democratically-oriented society, we made them what they are. We put them there and keep them there, and honor them and follow them. And they are leading our society into the deeper abyss of chaos. Little wonder that so many of our young people flounder and fall. And unless we can change course, the whole society will go the way of so many African-American youth. We will fall and disintegrate as surely as did ancient Greece and Rome, and ancient Ghana, Timbuktu and Songhay. So my thesis is not about race, it is about decay and decadence. It is not just about Black youth; it is about all of us. Send not to know for whom the Bell Tolls. It tolls for thee, and thee, and thee, and me.

Now that is the substance of my lecture. And I will be glad to take your questions. Before I do, however, let me amplify this thesis with a few more particulars.

Families, Schools Role Models, and Reference Groups

The crisis facing contemporary African-American youth is graphically illustrated in the life of one black man, Reggie Walton, who now lives in Washington, D.C. His life illustrates the value of family, school, role models, and reference groups in the lives of African-American youth.

Walton was born some 40 years ago and grew up in a small steel town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His was a stable, blue-collar, working-class family. Walton’s father worked the night shift as a janitor at Gimbel’s store in Pittsburgh. His was a simple-nuclear family consisting of mother, father, and three siblings. So Walton was a very privileged young lad: by growing up in a two-parent home instead of a single-parent one; by growing up in a working class family instead of an underclass family; and by growing up in the Northeast instead of the South. He was also privileged to have two siblings instead of growing up an only child.

But this family background was not enough to save Reggie from the destructive forces of his community and society. He fell in with what is termed “the wrong crowd.” He became delinquent and was arrested more than once. Fortunately for him, he was always released to his parents’ custody, but he continued his wayward ways. Because his father worked at night, his mother felt a great deal of the burden of his behavior and often complained to his father that Reggie would not do his homework, was disobedient, would not do his assigned chores around the house, and continued to run with the wrong gang.

As Reggie tells the story, his father was big and strong. He finally asserted himself physically and psychologically and precipitated a turning point in this young man’s life (Washington Post, Saturday, May 6, 1989, p. 31).

One Saturday morning when Reggie was in the kitchen making some breakfast for himself, he heard the heavy footsteps of his father coming toward him. He tried to move away. The father grabbed the boy by the shoulders. After trying briefly to escape, the boy gave up and faced his father.

“He grabbed me in the collar and he told me he was tired of me coming home at late hours and being disrespectful to my mother. And he said I had one more time to do that and then it was going to be me and him, and there was no way I could win. That put the fear of God into me. After that, they had no more problems with me. He literally turned me around.”

Walton finished high school and enrolled in the historically black West Virginia State College on an athletic scholarship. He thought he might become a high-school coach and teacher. There he fell in with another gang. This time, however, it was a right crowd; it was the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. Unlike his high school gang, this reference group was oriented toward high levels of achievement. They exuded pride-pride in themselves and in their group. Pride in their race and in their country. Unlike the downward spiral of the high school gang, this gang of college men were headed for upward mobility. And young Walton was determined to rise along with them.

Then one day, one of his idols, a tremendous role model for black men, came to the college to give a lecture. After his lecture, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall visited informally with the men of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. Afterwards, young Walton changed his career objectives. He raised his aspirations. He didn’t have to be only a high school coach. After college, Walton and nine of his fraternity brothers entered law school. By the time he was 32,
Walton was a Judge on the Washington, D.C. Superior Court. At age 40, he was tapped by President Bush to become Deputy Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, under drug czar William Bennett.

Looking back, Walton gives a lot of credit to both his family and his society at the time he was growing up. “My mother was an honor student in high school and my father was an exceptional artist. But because of the times, they did not have the opportunity to further their education. So they worked very hard to instill in us the feeling that we were going to be able to do things they could not do.”

Both Walton’s siblings are also college graduates and professionals in the field of education. At age 38, Walton got married, determined to provide the kind of strong family life that he knows helps young people succeed. As a judge, he was known for being tough and fair and inordinately concerned about rehabilitation. He spends long hours in the community visiting schools and preached often from the bench about parental and community responsibility.

When asked why he would give up a life-time position as a judge with a brilliant career ahead of him and take a $9,000 pay cut to accept a political appointment as deputy drug czar, Walton gave an indirect answer, which again illustrates the sources of his achievement. “Most of the friends I grew up with,” he said, “are either dead or in jail, alcoholics or junkies.... And I know that with the right guidance and a different mind-set, all those guys had the ability to do as much as I did in life, if not more. And knowing that,” he continued, “I feel a special responsibility... to reach out and try to do all that I can... The same story has been told by Dr. James Comer.

Now in my own view, it was not simply the physical confrontation with his father that made such a difference. It was the forceful psychological and social presence of his father, insisting in no uncertain terms that he cared about this young lad and about his mother and the rest of the family and was determined to leave no stone unturned to provide for their protection. It was a powerful message. It was the type of message that sometimes only strong black men can deliver to wayward black youth.

Dr. Wade Nobles tells the story of his father becoming exasperated with the waywardness of Wade and his brother. One time when the boys had again failed to carry out their assigned chores around the house, the father came into the room and sat them both down. “Listen here,” the father said. “I’m going down to the store to get myself some cigars. When I get back, this house better be clean. If not you better not be here, and you better not be gone.” Faced with this taxing dilemma, he and his brother stopped squabbling and blaming each other long enough to join hands in brotherhood and finish their chores.

The Absence of Strong Black Men

But the problem faced by so many of our young black males is that there is no strong black man in their home to help them grow up. The situation is critical and is getting worse.

In 1960, for example, when Reggie Walton was growing up, the overwhelming majority of African-American families with children had fathers in the home. The proportion of fathers in the home has declined steadily, however, since that time, falling from 77 percent in 1960 to 54 percent today. Today a majority of African-American children are destined to grow up in homes without resident fathers.

Now where, you might ask, have all the black men gone? The answer is complex. But in general, they have gone to five distinct places. First, many have gone to meet their maker. Black men die earlier; more often of a variety of causes, than anybody else. Thus the average life span, which is nearly 75 years for white women and 70 years for white men and black women, is only 64 years for black men.

Why do black men die so much earlier than other people? The process begins early. While more black male babies are born than black female babies, by the time they reach two years old there are more black females than males. Black males die in infancy more than other people. Second, males die earlier as teen-agers from accidents, homicide, and suicide. Third, black males die in their young adult years from these same causes, plus all the major diseases. A U.S. Government study has shown that among all the eight leading causes of death (heart disease, stroke, cancer, infant mortality, homicide, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and diabetes), blacks have higher death rates than whites. Moreover, black men have higher death rates than black women on all of them, except diabetes. Only from diabetes do black women die in higher proportions than black men. They have a death rate from diabetes of 22 per hundred thousand as compared with 18 for black men, 10 for white men and 9 for white women. We know, of course, that diabetes is closely associated with obesity, which inflicts black women more than it does other people.

So, black men die off sooner than black women and that is one reason for the shortage of black men in the home. Thus, there are only 85 black men in the population to every 100 black women. And in the middle years, say from age 25 to 45, their numbers are even fewer.

There is still further cause of the shortage of black husbands. Even when they are alive, many black men are not available as partners for black women. Small but increasing numbers are not available because they prefer other men as partners. Others because they prefer white women as partners. Black men marry across racial lines more than any other race and sex group. Much more, for example than black women do.

Large numbers of black men are inaccessible to serve as husbands and fathers because they are incarcerated. Black men are incarcerated more than black women and more than whites of either gender. There are more young black men in jails than in colleges. They are put in jail more often, stay in jail longer, and have more difficulty finding jobs when they get out; as a consequence, they return to crime and to jail more than any other group of people.

One of the bitter ironies of life is that in today’s climate, jails have become a highly desired, rapidly expanding growth industry. All states and localities are clamoring to have more jails built. They are...
a good economic investment, like military bases. They provide jobs, purchasing, power, and investments. In other words, they are a major source of wealth. But who gets the wealth and the jobs and the authority over these black-filled prisons? Like so much of the black-created wealth, it goes out of the black community into the hands of those who already have more resources. A few black lawyers benefit and a few other black jobs are created, but the bulk of this drain on black family resources goes to further enrich the larger society.

Moreover, even when black men are alive and out of jail, many are undesirable as partners for discerning black women. They are more likely to be unemployed, and more likely to be chronically unemployed. Large numbers of black men in their twenties and thirties have never had a steady job. Black women don’t like to marry men who are chronically unemployed. Chronically unemployed black men don’t like to get married. Thus, between 1960 and 1985 the rise in unemployment among black men and the rise in female-headed families have followed the same curve. While unemployment rose from 22 percent to 45 percent, the incidence of female-headed families rose by the same proportions, from 21 percent to 44 percent. There is nothing as effective as economic marginality to sap the viability of African-American families.

At the lower end of the socioeconomic structure, black men are more likely to be incapacitated by drugs and alcohol than black women or other people. At the upper end of the socioeconomic structure, black men are more likely to be high-school drop outs and college drop outs than black women.

Thus in one realm of life after another, and from a very young age, black males are being destroyed and crippled by their encounters with a hostile society. In trying to understand this, I have adapted a concept developed by two other black scholars, which they call the “Institutional Decimation of Black American Males.” The sociologist James Scott and the economist James Steward have observed that there are forces in the society that are systematically removing black males from the civilian population. Another scholar, James McGhee, has observed that literally from birth to death, black men run a gauntlet of dangers that meet them at every turn of their lives. Often when they meet these enemies they succumb, not always but more often than other people.

Economic Deprivation

As a consequence of their marginal hold on the economic system, black men and black families suffer greater economic deprivation than white families, and the situation is getting worse. When Reggie Walton was growing up, in 1970, black families in the Northeast had median family incomes, that were 67 percent of the median white family incomes in that region. This economic deficit was reflected directly in the family deficits. But as if this were not bad enough, in that same region of the country, by 1987, black family income had fallen to only 59 percent of white family income. Losing ground, indeed. In most regions of the country, the situation was even worse. In the Midwest, where good solid blue-collar working-class jobs have been a major source of achievement for black men in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Gary, black family income reached a peak of 73 percent of white family income by 1970. By 1987, however, it had plunged to only 52 percent. Thus, for every dollar earned by white families, black families earned 50 cents. How can we expect families to maintain the same family structures, and the same standards of living, the same standards of hope, optimism, and upward mobility for their children with such gross disparities in economic well-being? In the South the proportions remained the same over this period at about 56 percent of white family income. And in the far West, where economic conditions are better for blacks, the ratio plunged from a high of 75 percent in 1979 to 63 percent by 1987.

What is happening to expand the level of inequality in America? The answer is again complex. But chief among these factors are technological change, industrial decline, stagnant national planning, and racial discrimination. Economic expansion and affirmative action policies are chiefly responsible for the rise in economic well-being among blacks during the 1960s, when they began to close the gap with white families. The economic expansion of the 1950s did not work so well for blacks because we did not have affirmative action policies. Then, beginning in the 1970s, while the economic expansion continued, the affirmative action policies took a nosedive. In the 1980s, both a decline in economic productivity in the nation and a further decline in affirmative action policies led to the widening gap between black and white families’ economic well-being.

Economic Well-Being and Family Structure

Thus, if we wish to see a black man in every home, the answers would seem to be as clear as they are difficult to achieve. First, stop the inordinately high death rate of black men from the major diseases, from accidents, from homicide and suicide. Second, stop the inordinately high incarceration rates of black men by providing meaningful alternatives to prison and to the armed services. Third, stop black men from dropping out of school in inordinately high numbers. Fourth, provide more extensive drug and alcohol policies involving the supply, the demand, and the treatment. Finally, and foremost, provide a level of economic viability for black men, women, and families comparable to that provided other people. It is this matter of economic viability versus vulnerability that, more than any other single cluster of factors, drives a wedge into the stability and viability of African-American families and drives black men out of the home.

If we consider economic viability as measured by family income as a measure of social class, it is apparent that the higher the level of economic well-being among a people, the higher will be the incidence of men in the home to serve as husbands and fathers. At the very bottom of the economic ladder is the underclass, where persons have no meaningful attachment to the labor force live in unrelieved poverty, and only 25 percent of the homes have husbands and fathers. Among the solid blue-collar working class the proportion of men in the home rises to 60 percent. Among upper-middle-income families it rises to 83 percent; among high income black families, fully 96 percent have men in the home. The implication is clear. Increase the economic viability of African-American people and we will increase the likelihood of black men getting
married and staying married long enough to help rear their children. All the other rhetoric and admonitions pale in their consequence to the matter of economic viability.

If we can see clearly how African-American families suffer from the economic and social decimation of the African-American population generally, and if we note that there is some substantial diversity among the African-American people in this regard, we must raise the question of who benefits most from this pattern of subjugation. The answer is as simple as the question is complex. The larger society benefits most.

Thus, just as 200 years ago the African slave trade was created by Europeans with the consequence of enriching the European people and impoverishing the African people; and just as American slavery was maintained to the economic enrichment of the white slaveholders and their allies and to the further impoverishment of the enslaved people; and just as the sharecropping system was created and maintained to the economic benefit of the white land owners and the impoverishment of the newly freed African-Americans; and just as the contemporary welfare system operates to enrich the merchant class, the managerial class, and the professional class, all predominantly white, at the expense of the poor, so it is that the new black underclass has been created and maintained for the same ends and with the same consequences.

Not economics alone to be sure. Indeed, it is the convergence of economic, political, and social forces that causes such changes in social arrangements and in family patterns. More precisely, it is our view that technological changes drive economic changes which, in turn, drive changes in social institutions and in family patterns. No aspect of urban ghetto life better illustrates this dialectic than the massive infusion of the narcotics drug trade into the African-American community.

Drugs and African-American Families

What does this tell us about the drug epidemic and its impact on African-American families. It tells us that we must view the drug problem in economic terms as well as in moral, health, and legal terms. This is as true at the level of the individual and the families in the inner cities of America as it is in the national and international economy.

In the inner city, children are increasingly turning to drugs, drug use, drug pushing, and drug warfare. Drugs are especially pernicious in the inner cities, sapping the energy of our low-income families struggling for viability and integrity. Surely the drug epidemic suggests a moral crisis, a psychological crisis, and a social crisis.

Morally, from the highest levels of society to the lowest, we seem to have lost the will to strive for right versus wrong-unselfish concern for other people, compassion for the underdog, and commitment to the common good. In high places and low places, we as a society are victimized by unbridled, self-centered materialism.

Our young children in the inner cities have fallen victim to this national disease. They see it on television, in movies, and in popular songs. They see it in the conduct of officials, community leaders, race leaders, preachers, their own neighbors, and sometimes their own parents. Stealing, cheating, lying, pushing the other fellow down in order to get ahead has become almost normative in this society. And if that doesn’t work: use violence to get your way, whether in the government or in the corporation, or to get your way with a young girl or a young boy, no matter how closely they may be related to you or how helpless and dependent they may be. This disease, this malady of the heart, mind, and soul, is a central feature of the forces which are driving our young people to drugs.

 Drugs are ever so present, available, cheap, and hip, and ever so addictive. In this respect, the drug culture is anti-black, anti-African, contrary to the African-American values of concern for the other person, of spirituality, of honesty, of hard work, of sharing, and of uplifting.

The drug epidemic in our communities is also a psychological phenomenon. Drugs are most effective with people who have lost their self-esteem; who have lost or abandoned their sense of personhood, autonomy, self-determination, sobriety-people who have forgotten how beautiful they are, how smart they are, how much they are needed to build a better world and to build strong families, institutions, and industries. Sometimes they have forgotten these things because they have not been told them lately, consistently, and effectively by persons who are meaningful to them. Sometimes they think they are nobody because they have not been touched, hugged, kissed, smiled upon lately, consistently, and effectively. Sometimes they think they are not good because that is exactly what they have been told over and over again in words and in deeds, at home and abroad.

In a recent national study, which we discuss in our new book, a national sample of black adults, 18 years and older was asked: How often do you feel bad about yourself? When first reviewing the results, I was very pleased. While a majority feel bad about themselves sometimes, only a small minority, about 17 percent, feel bad about themselves often or persistently. But then when I looked again at these data, I noted that black women feel bad about themselves more often than black men, and that young people under 25 feel bad about themselves often than older people.

Then, I reflected on the fact that 17 percent is not such a small number after all. For since there are about 15 million black adults in the nation, that means that between 2.5 million and 3 million adults go around feeling bad about themselves most of the time. And what do you suppose these people who feel bad about themselves are teaching their children? They are not likely to hug them often and tell them how beautiful they are and how fortunate they are to be descendants of a people who “looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.” And they are not likely to tell them that they can do anything. As Reverend Jesse Jackson says, “If your mind can conceive it, and your heart can believe it, then your hands can achieve it.”

Sometimes children think they are nobody, not valued for themselves because they are given too much and attention too little. If we give our children more of our wealth than our time, we are sowing the seeds of low self-esteem. If we give them neither our wealth nor our time, because we don’t have enough of either,
or because we don’t appreciate their value, we assure that our children will be crippled. And in their crippled state of low self-esteem, they turn to what is immediately available, attractive, and indiscriminate. Drugs are made to order.

But in addition to the moral crisis and the psychological crisis, the drug epidemic represents a social crisis. People don’t feel the sense of belonging to a larger whole in society and in their community and often in their homes. They feel alone and adrift, disconnected. And in their longing for a sense of belonging and connectedness, they often turn to the drug fraternity which is waiting for them with open arms. They may be rejected by society, community, and family, but they are not rejected by the drug fraternity. Drugs in some respects have taken the place of religion and the church. Whosoever will, let him come. None will be turned away.

But we also know that children who are tied into a close-knit circle of meaningful associations in the family, in the church, and in community institutions; children who have high aspirations and high expectations of achieving; children who know where they are going and how to get there; children who have adults committed to helping them get there—are much less likely to fall victim to the drug culture than children who are more isolated from these social networks.

So, the drug epidemic is a moral crisis, a psychological crisis, and social crisis. But more than any of these, the drug epidemic represents an economic crisis. Young people also turn to drugs as a means of economic advancement. They look around them and see no way out. Then along come the drug pushers. They can learn the trade very quickly. As quickly as they can learn basketball. When they do, there is open opportunity for them to succeed, unlike other forms of business enterprise.

But the drug epidemic is preeminently an economic crisis at the upper levels of society, and it reverberates down to our children in the inner city. There are large numbers of people making large amounts of money out of the drug trade. They are often well-connected and well-protected by governments and law enforcement agents. There are large conglomerates and small countries that use drugs as an essential means of economic survival and exploitation. It is not the first time that black people have been victimized by the economic greed, immorality, and exploitation of powerful nations, armies, and “respectable” institutions. At one time during the European conduct of the African slave trade, there were whole industries and whole countries whose economies were dependent on the slave trade. Shipbuilding, trade relations, manufacturing companies—all made viable on the backs of the poor Africans caught up in this infamous industry. Slavery was a lot of things. It was an outrage; it represented spiritual decadence, and worse. But slavery was preeminently an economic enterprise.

In America, slavery was the underpinning of the economy we have today. The agricultural era could not have been ushered-in to replace the pastoral era had it not been for slave labor. The industrial North could not have built its industrial might had it not been for the success of the agricultural revolution. So for four hundred years, slavery was economic exploitation of black people protected by government, armies, navies, and religious institutions as well. So, today the drug culture is the slavery of the 21st century. To fight it effectively it is necessary to understand it. It can best be understood as we now understand slavery: a moral, psychological, social, and economic undertaking, highly protected by the most powerful and most respectable of forces, way beyond the inner cities. And it can best be fought as slavery was fought, and as Winston Churchill called on England to fight the Nazis. We should fight the drug epidemic on land, on the sea, and in the air. We should fight it in the streets and in the suites. And most of all, we should fight it in our minds and in our children’s minds.

**Encouraging Signs**

There are some encouraging signs on the horizon. This lectureship is among those encouraging signs. At our church in inner-city Washington, D.C. (Shiloh Baptist Church, Reverend Henry C. Gregory III, pastor), the men of the church have in essence adopted about 100 boys in the neighborhood from ages 11 to 15. Our goal is ambitious in the extreme. Working with them, their parents (mostly mothers), and their teachers and other elements in the community, we are trying to challenge the minds and hearts, the bodies and souls of these young men, so that they will be strong, resolute. So that they will know that they are beautiful, and smart, and wonderful, and highly needed to help make a better world and build strong families. And then, our theory and our faith hold, they will be strong enough to resist the drug culture that awaits them on the streets every time they walk outside their door. It is high hope, a tall order.

We bring them to the Family Life Center, established by the church, every day after school. We provide them a healthy snack, supervised homework, and recreation. More important, in the process we provide them role models of adults who care about them and who are competent to help them grow. If we do nothing else but keep these young men off the street for three hours after school every day, we do them a service.

Then, on Wednesday evening, we halt all recreation and assemble for a workshop on some aspect of life—drugs, education, history, sex, a wide range of topics. We provide experts who know more about these things then we do. The boys are bright and inquiring, if not always orderly or attentive.

On weekends, we provide them with field trips to social, cultural, recreational, or scientific activities. We work also with the parents’ organization. Periodically, we take them on excursions to big city events in New York, such as Madison Square Garden, the theatre, and basketball tournaments.

It is a small effort. Churches and other organizations over the nation are doing similar works. Middle-class and working-class people are joining with people of the inner city to help these children grow strong in body, mind, and spirit. Now if we can just get this nation to provide economic parity for them, programs such as ours can be enormously effective. But they cannot do the job alone.

It is a tall order. But we know that our people have conquered difficult enemies before. We built the pyramids. We invented math
and science and helped philosophy. Then in this country, we undermined and helped to overthrow slavery. In this country we helped to overthrow Jim Crow. Any people who could do these things can certainly help to undermine and overthrow the drug culture. But we have to do it by being true to our cultural heritage and by using all our resources and the resources around us as well.

My mother would say nothing beats a failure but a try. And Benjamin Mays would remind us that it is not failure that is sin, but low aim. Let us aim high.

Selected Responses to Questions from the Audience:

Answer 1.

I think the substance of your questions is that, in addition to the need for strong black men in the lives of youth, what about recreational facilities and libraries and other opportunities for these young people to grow in their minds as well as their bodies, and perhaps spiritually as well. I think you are correct. It is terribly important to have these resources available to youth. I think the emphasis on having men around may sometimes be exaggerated, but it is also important to have a couple of extra hands to do some of these things.

Raising children is hard. “With my wife’s help” I have raised a couple of children, and they were girls. And girls are easier than boys. Imagine what I could have done if they had been boys! You may get different views on this, but the point is, it is a big job. Which is why the Africans had it right in the first place. You see, when we were captured in 17th Century Africa, we knew that family was a broad thing, an encompassing thing: not just who was married to whom, and their children. It’s a big thing; you need a lot of people to make a family and to make a life for young people.

So men are important because they add additional hands, but they are also important because in our society it is important to have role models. One of the things men do, however, is that they help to get some of the needed resources. And again, that’s not new. I’m a product of a little town in Alabama, Marion, where after slavery the black men got together and said, “We’re going to buy some land and build a school. And they built a school and called it “Lincoln School.” Now, they couldn’t teach, but they could buy the land and then build the school, and then they invited people to come down and teach. And for 100 years that little town, that little community, because of that school and the church, and because of the leadership of these men, were able to produce talented people.

Answer 2.

Child abuse is one of those growing diseases that I spoke about. About twenty years ago, my colleague, Dr. Gene Giovanni and I did a study in California of child neglect and abuse. We found that child neglect and abuse was much more a white phenomenon than a black phenomenon. So we tried to figure out why that was the case. We decided that it was the extended family that gave some release to parents and enabled them to take better care of their children, but that’s vanishing. And so that’s one of the factors in the increasing incidence of neglect and abuse among black families. But it is contrary to our heritage, it is un-African, it is not keeping within our cultural traditions. It is one of the ways in which blacks are becoming Westernized, civilized to Western ways of abusing their own children.

It is getting so bad that as children, as they are growing a little bigger, are beginning to abuse their siblings and even their own parents. So internal family violence is a major problem. It is increasing. I think for the same reason that some of these other maladies are increasing—an absence of values, the absence of a structure that binds people to each other, and the absence of a sense of commitment to each other. So as we get more bombarded by technology and all these other things, I think we are losing our way, losing our sense of values and priorities. Blacks are succumbing to this violence the way other people are.

Again, I think the solution is to look squarely at the nature of the problem and not to dodge it, so we can fashion solutions that are effective. We must provide people with alternatives, so that they can get some release from their frustration and some opportunity to express themselves in positive ways, so that they do not turn against the people that are closest to them. It happens often, you know, that people who are frustrated and who have pent up anxieties and so on, turn to the people who are closest to them, instead of the people who have caused their problem, to strike out. And so the helpless, young children are victimized by this disease.

Answer 3.

You don’t assume that young people are going to learn how to be adults. In Africa, they were trained how to be adults. And so when they pass a set of instructions, a set of skills they have learned to do, a set of skills they have learned at age thirteen or older, then you induct them into manhood and womanhood, into adulthood, and it is called a rite of passage. They are now responsible, and they are now given accolades and given the mantle, and they are told that they are important and that they have to be responsible for other young people who are coming along. It is a real effective way of relating to young people and having them be helpful to other people, and not just to look for help themselves.

Answer 4.

One way to remain optimistic is to have dinner with Gisela Konopka. At dinner last night we were talking, and most of the people were younger than me, but she was the leader of optimism: we can do this; we should do this; we should organize this; we should do this; and so on. Seriously, I think it’s important to have a long view. I am not really optimistic about today and tonight and tomorrow, but I am optimistic in the long view because I have seen that, through history, things happen.

For example, one of the most depressing things about our glorious history as African people that I didn’t mention is the fact that the great civilizations that I talked about, fell. Like Rome and Greece, they fell, too, for a variety of reasons, but one of the things about the African-spiritual heritage is this: Professor Chancellor Williams, who did the studies, found that often 1,000 years later, some of these institutions, civilizations were regenerated. And the new civilization or institution will have the same hallmarks as the one that died. Because of that spirit, that sense of resurgence that is within all of us, but was especially strong within the African people,
and because I come from that heritage, I tend to be a little optimistic about the long view of things. We can.

I grew up poor, in the South. I was thinking the other day about my situation. I was in a strong family, but it was tough. We lived in Birmingham, Alabama, before the outbreak of World War II, so there was still the depression, because the war had not come to cure the depression. There were my mother, my father, my brother, my nephew, my grandmother, and me, and we all lived in two rooms. My father had lost his job in the coal mines because he had an accident; he broke his leg, and he couldn’t work, and the company fired him.

So we moved to the city, but we couldn’t get welfare because we were not residents. Life was rough. I lived through that, and I’ve seen by what I’ve called “screens of opportunity.” And the first thing my father did, of course, when we moved into that little place was to go down the street to the church and join up, and he took us all down there. Because the church, you see, has been a strong source of achievement in the black experience and in the black community. And the second thing that happened, when my father couldn’t find a job, my mother found a job as a domestic. My father hated that. Oh, did he hate that! And life was rough for us. Tension was high until he found a job. So, having survived things like that, and having seen that faith, and hard work and optimism, and good luck can help move things along, you have a sense that it can be done by human interaction if you work hard at it.