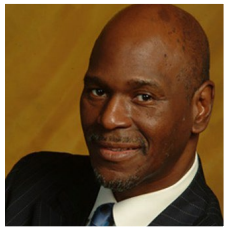


GARBAGE, GARBAGE AND MORE — WAR ON GARBAGE



By Malik Ahmed

The abundance of garbage in poor African American neighborhoods should have all decent people upset enough to do something constructive to eliminate this problem. As ordinary people, civic leaders and small community groups, we need to declare war on garbage. We grapple with many social and economic disparities that are generated by race and poverty but rarely do we give adequate attention to the issue of garbage in the African American community.

The amount of garbage and debris that is spewed around our neighborhoods is appalling. Few have given focused attention to the detrimental impact on life that garbage and trash posed to the African American community, families and especially children.

A quick survey of our St. Louis northside neighborhoods clearly reveals how much trash and debris of all sorts is dumped and/or discarded on nearly every corner and in the alleys. Our parks are an embarrassment with the amount of trash children must navigate through just to play. Many times the trash is loaded with environmentally hazardous materials and toxic waste.

The trash is so omnipresent that most community residents look at it as a “fact of living in neighborhoods that are impoverished.” Thus, trash and garbage become nearly invisible. However, we should be outraged and determined enough to change this awful condition.

The physical presence of trash breeds a distortion of the mind on so many important aspects of life. This is most acute for children growing up in the midst of miles and miles of trash. Their value system is negatively impacted and consequently is a major contributing factor of them growing into the images they see in their environment: trash, abandoned and badly vandalized buildings, broken glass, discarded household items and car tires thrown about in their neighborhoods. These images help to perpetuate a sense of hopelessness in them and creates a meaningless view of life.

Living under these conditions they come to believe it is OK to break windows, vandalize cars and destroy public property. The winos are just as guilty. They discard empty wine and beer bottles near or adjacent to places where they lounge.

Our community raises righteous indignation and hell when there are cases of police abuse on members of our community, which we are right to do, but we blandly accept the deplorable conditions of trash in our community. We should become equal opportunity hell-raisers when it comes to trash in our neighborhoods. We should be outraged and determined to change it!

Recently our community outreach department has called attention to this problem by launching a Neighborhood Clean Sweep campaign. Vice President, James Clark, was keenly aware of the need to address this issue to coincide with Better Family Life’s overall efforts to reduce crime, gang affiliation, drug distribution, and gun violence.

The Clean Sweep anti-garbage campaign involved marshalling hundreds of volunteers to go into neighborhoods to conduct a massive neighborhood clean-up. In this endeavor we have also involved city agencies, churches, and secured heavy equipment from construction companies to focus on trimming trees, cleaning up alleys, mowing lawns and picking up trash and debris on sidewalks and vacant lots.

To date, we have conducted cleaning blitzes in several neighborhoods such as Jeff Vander Lou, along Page Boulevard, Hamilton Heights, Wells-Goodfellow and in Pagedale.

On Saturday, August 26th the Clean Sweep army descended on the Walnut Park neighborhood. We were accompanied by hundreds of volunteers and greeted by neighborhood residents.

We are well aware that a one-day massive clean-up campaign is a mere drop in the bucket and isn’t going to permanently change a “culture of neglect” that has developed over generations in impoverished people and communities. It is a small step in fighting a war that more of us need to join. To be successful, neighborhood residents must become the captains, lieutenants and foot soldiers in the fight by initiating clean-up efforts in their respective neighborhoods.

Let’s begin by talking with, educating and mentoring our youth, who in their ignorance think it is cool to trash up the places where they live, visit or play.

Let’s begin picking up garbage where we are and encourage all of the people we influence (family, friends and neighbors) to pick up debris.

Let’s put consistent pressure on elected and city officials to be assured that our neighborhoods are getting more that equitable treatment in fighting this battle through quality trash pick-up services, street cleaning, and enforcement of dumping laws.

The neighborhood Clean Sweep is just one example of what can be done. Use your creative mind to think of other ways that average citizens and youth can become actively engaged and ultimately win our war on garbage in our community.

