

# Stirring the Melting Pot

kelicia hollis interviews jeff johnson

BY KELICIA HOLLIS

PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT KINGSTON

Jeff Johnson has worked as a political correspondent, investigative journalist, and activist for decades. He has travelled all over the world, speaking to different communities on topics ranging from the state of hip-hop to our current political climate. He is a contributor to CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and Sirius XM Radio, and stars in *The Truth with Jeff Johnson* on BET. Recently, Johnson served as the National Director of the NAACP's Youth and College Division. In honor of Black History Month, Columbia's 2009 Black Heritage Month planning committee invited him to be the keynote speaker for the opening ceremony. Kelicia Hollis sat down with Johnson to talk to him about building community in diversity.

**Seeing as it's Black History Month, and you were the keynote speaker at our opening ceremony for it, what do you think is the most important thing we need to focus on—not just as black students, but as college students in general?**

Everybody's not supposed to be focused on the same thing. People have interests, they have callings, they have concerns, they have passions. And the areas that people should be focusing on should be connected to those interests, those

concerns, those passions, those callings. Otherwise, people are involved just to be involved. And people really have [an] impact when their activity is a reflection of something that is internally and integrally connected to who they are.

**In a community like Columbia, where there are a lot of different cultures coming together, what can we do to actually achieve diversity?**

Diversity is not community. ... The definition of diverse doesn't say unity, it doesn't say community, it doesn't say togetherness, it doesn't say agreement, it doesn't even say understanding—it's just diverse. So I think that people need to be a little bit more honest about the fact that diversity doesn't mean community. And if people want community, then we need to work for community and not diversity. There's not legitimate community oftentimes between the same groups, let alone different groups. So if you haven't been able to create the culture that truly develops community among the same group, you're not going to be able to create it among different groups.

**What type of tools do we need to build community?**

They have to want it, first of all. After they want it, they have to be able to communicate, and honest communication—not superficial communication. They have to be able to move beyond service-level window-dressing, and move to substantive relationship-building. And relationship-building between individuals—you can't create group communication if you don't have individual communication. People need to communicate outside of their box and their own personal life before they [can] expect that their office or their organization or their institution will do so. Institutional communication and interaction is usually a reflection of individual communication and interaction.

**Should this begin higher up, with administrators, or should it start with the students?**

It should start amongst the people who want it. So, there are times when university leaders are a catalyst for that, there are times when students are a catalyst for that, and I don't think that there's a yellow brick road to community-building, but somebody's got to create the example.

**How can Columbia fight apathy?**

The same people who care about the black-white achievement gap don't care about the genocide in the Congo. I think people have to stop being judgmental about what other people care about. The question is: do they care about something? And the way that we challenge people to be more involved in issues outside of their circle is by first being concerned about issues inside of their

circle. So they don't care about the black-white achievement gap. You should be asking them what they do care about. What is a concern of yours? What do you think is a necessary ill that needs to be addressed? And then you can begin creating connections with people from the issues they do care about, as opposed to demonizing them for the issues they don't [care about].

## WE NEED TO WORK FOR COMMUNITY AND NOT DIVERSITY.

**Some people think that for a young black person, going to an Ivy League school means being a sell-out. Is there a distinct advantage to going to a historically black college over an Ivy?**

I think that there are cultural and social conflicts at every institution. So, it's not like all black students at an HBCU [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] get along any more than all students at Ivy League schools get along. The educational experience is a multi-faceted one, and what someone gets out of the institution that they go to is unique for them.

There are people who are black who have never been in a black social environment, and going to an HBCU is helpful for their own cultural identity. There are those who have grown up in all-black environments and aren't necessarily looking for that kind of cultural experience, but they're looking for a more specific intellectual experience, academic experience.

**What about disadvantages?**

Choosing a college is like choosing what you're going to wear. Everybody has their own style, everybody has their own flair, and so what's good for one person isn't necessarily great for another. I think there's just as much value in HBCUs, and relevance in HBCUs, as there is relevance and value in the Ivy League. The question is: who is the student, and can that institution help them develop into the person that they're supposed to be?

There are people who have come to Ivy League schools and failed miserably, just as there are people who have gone to HBCUs and failed miserably. Because at the end of the day, the environment that we all need is specific to who we are. I think what we can do is spend more time trying to individually look at what young people as individuals need to be successful. ... What academic environment is going to best prepare you? That should be the question, Not placing value on one school over another. It's what school is better for me. ●

