

The Sunday Capital

Opinion

Forging path toward better, more just America

By James Wyatt

I applaud the article, "Let's make America better, not bitter," by Carl Snowden in the April 2 edition of The Capital. Growing up in Norfolk, Virginia, I personally experienced the racial injustices cited by Snowden.

As a 12 year old, I was threatened with words and physical violence if I did not vacate a seat on public transportation, legally occupied, next to a white woman. Also, I tell my white Naval Academy golfing buddies, many of whom served in Norfolk, about my trip to school. I would walk three minutes from my home, stand in front of Granby High School, board the streetcar for the trip uptown to Princess Ann Road, then transfer to the bus for the final leg of my trip to Booker T. Washington High School, everyday.

However, as a soon-to-be 90-year-old assessing the progress we have made in our country and recognizing there are people of flawed character in all races, I say with confidence to Snowden and America: "Yes, we can!" And I am motivated to write this complementary piece about how I believe we can achieve that goal.

As suggested by Snowden, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. clearly set the tone and gave his life to achieving a better America. So, I have included an excerpt from his Sept. 18, 1956, letter to a remarkable Black woman, who is lost to history:

"Dear Miss Burroughs: It was a real pleasure seeing you in Denver. Your remarks after my address were magnificent. You said more in a few words than most people could

say in hours. It is always a real pleasure to listen to you. Let me thank you once more for the interest you have taken in our struggle.

"I can assure you that your moral support and financial contributions have given me renewed courage and vigor to carry on."

Given the above, I think we can reasonably conclude that King embraced the views of Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961) about the future of our country.

Of particular interest on the issue of race is the relationship of the 20-year-old Burroughs and 50-year-old Baltimore native Annie Armstrong. They had what was called an unlikely friendship because Armstrong was white and Burroughs was Black.

It was about race in 1897 and provides guidance for what we might do about race today if we are to make America better, not bitter, as stated by Snowden.

I was recently invited to speak about Burroughs to the residents of Park Place during Black History Month. I excitedly accepted the invitation. However, I chose to speak during Women's History Month, because the theme of Black History Month was "Resistance" and Burroughs' message was about "Resistance and Cooperation."

I was heartened by the white audience's reception of the presentation and participation in the discussion about Burroughs' views and vision for America.

It seemed to confirm her statement at the Baptist Women's Convention in 1956: "We have quite enough of the occasional, planned meetings together on special occasions, but we have far from enough united interests to bring us together on common grounds to face our common

problems and discuss what we can do — together — to enlighten all of the people of this nation and enlist them in all of the services that make for the common ground."

Black American actor Tyler Perry offered a similar view at the 2017 Country Music Awards ceremony: "Now it has never been more important that we all come together, find some common ground, spend some time listening to each other, and realize that we are more alike than we are not alike."

I believe we can do more, such as the Park Place event, to find that common ground right here in Annapolis. Burroughs' high school teacher was Mary Church Terrell, who passed in our area, Highland Beach, in 1954.

Burroughs separated the country's racism problem into two areas — structural and individual behavior. She encouraged Blacks towards full citizenship; assailed the country's power structure; urged Blacks to fight discrimination; demanded Whites to end racism; and challenged both races to cooperate in building a just society.

Her views about cooperation demanded responsibilities and challenges from both races. As early as 1928, she wrote "12 Things the Negro Must Do for Himself" and "12 Things White Folks Must Stop Doing."

It is here where I broaden Snowden's views to include responsibilities and actions of both races to solve our problems. While Burroughs recognized the injustices perpetrated against Blacks, she felt we must stop blaming other folks for all of our problems. I only discovered Burroughs in 2008,

when I saw a street named after her in Northeast Washington, D.C. After these

many years, I continue to struggle with understanding why I only heard of this remarkable Black woman when I was 74 years old.

In 2010, I had the good fortune of meeting Mary Alice Dorsett, a student at the school Burroughs established in 1909. Dorsett and I had an exceptionally rewarding friendship until she died in 2017.

She shared the following with me, something which guides my every action: "Col. Wyatt, Miss Burroughs said to me: 'A race rises on its own wings, or is held down by its own weight.'"

Burroughs died in 1961. Historical records suggest she had become more militant by 1960. Nonetheless, she offered the following to our Black leaders in the hope that they would make plans 25, 50, 100 years in the future to achieve the true goals of equality in America:

"The Day of the protest has come ... but the 'weapons' of Black warfare must not be hatred and frustration ... rather, the African American must use education, improvement of home and family life, and Christian values to achieve their goals."

I encourage the readers of Snowden's article and mine to reach out to me with your views, whether the feedback be positive or negative. More information about the life and legacy of Burroughs can be found on my website, www.burroughsinfo.org.

"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." — George Orwell's novel "1984"

James Wyatt is a retired U.S. Army colonel who resides in Annapolis.