

Acceptance, Understanding, & Opportunity.

The 20th Man That Stands Before You.

By Ron Scott, Jr., July, 2022.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

In February of 1936, about one in every twenty persons living in Wheeling was of African descent. Today, in 2022, the population of Wheeling is 27,052. Of that number, 1435 are Black or of African descent. Which is 5.3% - or 1 in 20.

However, there is a world of difference between this twentieth man that stands before you; and the twentieth man of 1936. Neither of us is a newcomer nor an alien, for our ancestors were settled by force in Virginia one year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. This was a fact known to that Twentieth Man; but some are attempting to erase those facts for this Twentieth Man. Nationally, our Black population knows but one country- The United States. We have grown considerably in our attempts to define our place in American history. We have adopted several African & Afro-centric cultural practices to help dogear our page in world history. Despite these attempts to restore & renew our past, present, and future identity; we swear allegiance to but one flag - the stars and stripes. We acknowledge but one capital- Washington.

A brief survey from 1936 shows that the Black population had six churches of three denominations. Today, we have half of that. It went on to say how the Black population owned real estate worth about \$500,000; and managed a fraternal corporation worth nearly \$130,000. One drug store, one tailor shop, two restaurants, two billiard parlors, and two beauty shops. I don't point these facts out to show a regression. These numbers reflect the only brand of integration that was being offered at the time. A brand where the Negro was allowed to patronize the white establishments, but the white man would never lower himself to patronize the Negro establishments. If they were being forced to allow you in their stores, then what sense did it make for you to have your own? It was a forced façade dressed up to look like harmonious inclusion. In 1936, where there was no opportunity, Wheeling's Twentieth Man created one. The Twentieth Man of today has bought into the handshake promise that was given after 1936. He sees that by redefining his

place in the number scheme between 1-19; he has also redefined his position in society. The Twentieth Man of 2022 is a consumer. Nothing more. Nothing less. We confused Integration with equality. That mistake has cost us dearly.

The biggest and most significant loss has been that of the Black professional. In 1936, the Black community of Wheeling had four physicians; two dentists; twelve clergymen; one lawyer; and twenty-two schoolteachers. Those numbers seem surreal today.

Their city government employed three firemen and one patrol driver. The only constant is that the county government, of both times, has no man or woman of color in its employ.

A glaring difference in the two 20th Men is our approach and perspective on race relations. The 20th Man of 1936 said "relations between the two races in this community have been peaceful and helpful. No serious bi-racial clash has ever taken place in the city's history; due largely to the liberal attitude of the whites and the splendid conduct of the colored people." This is a difficult concept to grasp when 15 years before this speech was made, a mere 22 miles from the spot where it was delivered; a race riot occurred where 200 Black residents were forced out of their homes in the middle of the night by an armed white mob in Beech Bottom. Before that, in Wheeling WV, a Black man driving an expensive car—just as the famous playboy professional boxer Jack Johnson was known for—was beset by a mob and hanged. I am however forced to give the 20th Man of 1936 the benefit of the doubt. When you are faced with traumatic events from hour to hour; a year without one must feel like an eternity. Today's 20th Man isn't without sin of this type. We demonstrated on the steps of city hall and lauded the near stellar relationship that we have with our police department while ignoring the memory of Bobby Wade.. and how he died. Which happened within our lifetime.

Justice and candor are required when paying attention to the handicaps suffered by Wheeling's twentieth man. Then and now. The issue of equal school facilities has finally been tackled and overcome, yet, since 1954 there have been only 3 Black valedictorians. The blatant barriers that existed in employment are removed but quickly replaced with nepotism and modern-day grandfather clauses. This is

much less about numbers, statistics, and figures to prove or disprove progress. It's about the obstacles facing Wheeling's 20th Man, and how those obstacles went from deliberate roadblocks made of concrete intentionality to almost invisibly thin red lines drawn around housing and financial freedoms that make mile long gaps look like we are a mere few feet apart. If you were to conduct a poll asking numbers 1-20, what they really want out of life, the answers would be almost identical: The ability to achieve, the opportunity for redemption (if needed), and a limitless future for their children. We don't want different things.

This 20th Man that stands before you, wants the same things as the 20th Man of 1936: Acceptance, Understanding, & Opportunity.

Acceptance into the concept of community. A community is not a compilation of likeminded, similarities. A true community is a blending of differences & variations of individuals tied together through humanity & proximity. The true work of a community is to create enough room on a common ground, so that everyone can find secure footing.

Understanding. Understand that our grandparents', our parents', and our own experiences in this country are completely different than yours. What was character building adversity to your ancestors was generational trauma to ours. We don't need someone to blame or someone to fix us or someone to explain our pain away. We need to know we are not alone. We need to know our experiences and the results of those experiences haven't made us unable to assimilate or made you unwilling to empathize.

By Opportunity, we do not mean unfair advantage that colors any contributions to our struggles as handouts or missionary work. We mean the opportunity to make mistakes. The opportunity to not be judged on a criteria that looks less like perfection and more like trial & error. We want the luxury of failure without it effectively tainting those who come after us from the same or similar opportunities.

When confronted by figures of authority, we would like the opportunity to feel and express the full gamut of emotions, good or bad, without turning it, resulting in professional or literal death.

14 years from now will mark the 100-year anniversary of the origi-

nal 20th Man speech. If within that time, you do not embrace the nearly 1500 hands to aid you in pulling this community load upward, they will pull against you and drag the community load downward. If you do not begin to shift your focus from the one twentieth of ignorance and crime in Wheeling; and turn your sights to one twentieth of its intelligence and progress... If you do not cultivate, encourage, and empower the one twentieth of business and industrial progress in Wheeling; then the speech of that 20th Man will be vastly different. He will be forced to come to a vicious realization. The most important thing that he has given up on his quest to become a true American, is the one thing that true Americans are defined by: Their independence. This country has handed opportunities to so many immigrants who've landed on its shore, while playing a shell game with the Black man. The Wheeling of 2022 is resurging since the slow & painful deaths of mills, plants, & mines. The feeling of rebirth is exhilarating. We are in the age of opportunity and creativity. Thinking outside of the box is rewarded practice. One that Wheeling's 20th Man should be excellent at, since we've lived our lives there. Wheeling today can ascend to heights that the Wheeling of 1936 could never dream of. We must remember that it takes all of us. Not just our best minds or our most creative artists, or our deepest thinkers. We can become transformative and turn our most hurt, to our most healed. Our most damaged to our most determined and our most hushed to our most heard. We must do it together. The journey cannot be made if we must carry those who we refuse to let make progress.

With that being said, as Wheeling's 20th man today, I am thankful that I can look around and be pleased with where I am. I can look to the past and see where I've been, and how far I've come; but the clearest view of all is when I look forward to the future. I am no longer an audience member, who tries to recreate what I see, on a smaller scale. I am a part of what is coming. My voice carries suggestions. My hands shape and mold. My thoughts ignite action. The community I am a part of shall constitute a veritable body of life» innovation» uplifting and redefining every effort to advance our local social order.