Kudos

Plenty of people will take Indiana Black Expo's theme of "Summer Celebration" seriously as they enjoy Babyface at a free concert this evening. Yet this year's Expo, like all others, is about much more. Activities such as much-needed exams for breast and prostate cancer at the Black and Minority Health Fair and tales of success from such big names as author E. Lynn Harris are reminders that the goal ultimately is to eliminate the quality-of-life issues still plaguing many of Indiana's communities.

Outrage

Apparently, Percy Bronson didn't want to pay the price for killing Joshua McAtee this spring. Why else would he allegedly have conspired earlier this month with 19-year-old Shaun Matthews to shoot Christopher Bridges, who told police he saw McAtee's murder? Once again, the blood of the young is spilled needlessly on Indianapolis' streets.

Overheard

"Our youths are being slaughtered in the streets of Indianapolis this summer in unacceptable numbers. What are we going to do as a city?"

Olgen Williams,
executive director of Christamore House. Four males, ages 15 and 16, were shot and killed in little more than a month.

Township black male dropout rates are unacceptably high

Russ Pulliam

Our position is:
Stemming the dropout crisis among black males in Indianapolis suburbs is crucial to the community's economic and social health.

As program coordinator at the Indiana OIC State Council, Tawnya McCrary has worked with dozens of black male dropouts from Indianapolis Public Schools.

But she didn't realize suburban township schools also were mired in a black male dropout crisis until she and her husband moved their son out of Northwest High to Pike High School.

By the time Michael Harrison left Pike after his junior year, he was still 21 credits shy of graduation. He witnessed almost a fight a day at the school. His own class-clown antics hurt his academic progress. He and his mother also objected to faculty members' attitudes toward black students.

Although Harrison thought "it would be almost impossible" to stay in school, he did eventually graduate, after transferring to North Central High School in Washington Township.

Hundreds of other black males in township high schools, however, are dropping out.

An analysis of graduation data by Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Balfanz for The Star Editorial Board reveals that high schools in four Marion County township districts are as much dropout factories — graduating less than 50 percent of black males — as those in IPS.

- Just 31 percent, or one of every three, black males who entered Perry Township's Southport and Perry Meridian high schools as freshmen in 1998 graduated four years later. Only IPS, with one in four black males in its original class of 2002 earning a diploma, performed worse.
- Only 61 of the 143 black males who entered Warren Central High School in 1998 graduated in 2002. Six of every 10 black male freshmen dropped out.
- Only 41 percent of black male freshmen entering Franklin Central High School in 1998 graduated in four years.
- Pike Township's black male graduation rate was 49 percent in 2002.

Black males fare better in districts such as Washington Township, until recently run by new IPS Superintendent Eugene White. Yet, even there gaps persist. Three of every 10 black males entering North Central High School in 1998 eventually dropped out. Just one in 10 white males failed to graduate on time.

Franklin Central Principal Kevin Koers can rattle off all he has done to improve the school's black male promotion power rating (an index developed by John Hopkins researchers to track students' progression) of 52 percent. The school has offered cultural sensitivity training for teachers; kept students who didn't finish homework after school to complete it; and encouraged black males to become leaders in community service activities such as a charity basketball tournament.

Yet former students such as Chris Carter say teachers "just try to teach what their lesson books say and get out of there." Which is one reason Carter says he decided to quit school this year.

Rich Miller / The Star

Set him straight: Michael Harrison almost dropped out of Pike High School before his mother, Tawnya McCrary, program coordinator with the Indiana OIC State Council, and her husband transferred him to North Central, where he finally graduated. Hundreds of other black males in township high schools, however, are dropping out.

The suburban problem in graduating black males is reflective of overall national and state achievement gaps. A mere 38 percent of black males graduated from Indiana's high schools in 2002; just 42 percent of America's black males in the class of 2002 earned diplomas.

Boys of all races tend to graduate at lower rates than girls. Yet black males bear the heaviest toll for dropping out. About 37 percent of black male dropouts will likely land in prison, according to Princeton University Professor Bruce Western; it's one reason why only 603,000 black males were attending college while nearly 800,000 were serving prison time in 2000.

The woes of urban districts have attracted considerable attention from researchers, political leaders and the news media. But Schott Foundation researcher Michael Holzman, whose report on black male graduation rates identified IPS as the fifth-worst in the nation, has found that suburban schools nationwide are "not doing much better by and large."

One reason is poverty. Perry Township Superintendent H. Douglas Williams notes that the district pulls students from the same poor Southside neighborhoods as IPS' Manual High, the worst-performing high school in the state. Many of Perry's black students come from Martindale-Brightwood, one of the city's most poverty-stricken areas.

Cultural differences also keep students and educators from connecting, a problem Marion County schools have been wrangling with ever since the 1971 court-ordered desegregation plan brought more blacks into suburbia starting in 1981. Ten years ago, the Indianapolis Commission on African-American Males found that suspensions of black males in township districts — a contributor to dropping out — were disproportionately higher than for other groups, according to Director Lyman Rhodes.

Population growth in the suburbs is continuing to bring more diversity. Franklin Central's enrollment has increased 45 percent — from 1,450 to 2,100 — since Koers took over the school five years ago. The district was once almost exclusively rural and white. Now, blacks make up 14 percent of Franklin Central's enrollment.

Suburban schools can begin to find solutions to the black male dropout crisis in the work of the Cheltenham School District near Philadelphia.

Cheltenham Superintendent Christopher McGinley says districts tend to "work around the edges" of the achievement gap. But a complete overall is needed.

Cheltenham, which is 38 percent black, began transforming itself four years ago. One step involved better communicating to black parents what courses students need to take to get into college. A sign of progress: The number of black students in Advanced Placement classes has doubled in the past three years.

Help also can come from the grass roots. In Minneapolis, hospital administrator Gary Cunningham and others increased community involvement in the schools and raised awareness about the black male achievement gap.

Parents also must be involved. McCrary helped put her son back on the path to graduation by making sure he took night and online classes, along with his normal courses at North Central, to regain lost ground.

The tragedy of black men dropping out of school — and into prison and poverty — carries a high price for all Hoosiers, whether they live in the suburbs, on farms or in cities. Confronting that tragedy is essential to preserving Indianapolis' — and Indiana's — economic destiny.

Township rates

Four Marion County township school districts recorded black male graduation rates below 50 percent based on statistics from the class of 2002.

Male graduation rate		Overall
MSD Perry Township		
Black	31%	
White	52%	52%
MSD Franklin Township		
Black	41%	
White	67%	67%
MSD Warren Township		
Black	43%	
White	63%	55%
MSD Pike Township		
Black	49%	
White	70%	71%
MSD Decatur Township		
Black	57%	
White	67%	65%
MSD Wayne Township		
Black	61%	
White	58%	66%
MSD Washington Township		
Black	62%	
White	76%	76%
MSD Lawrence Township		
Black	68%	
White	77%	77%

Source: Johns Hopkins University Center for the Social Organization of Schools

The Star

LEFT BEHIND

A STAR EDITORIAL BOARD SERIES

Reporter seeks justice for victims and for God

Jerry Mitchell breaks the mold. The Mississippi newspaper reporter doesn't fit conventional categories or stereotypes.

He's an investigative reporter who's broken big stories on the Ku Klux Klan and corruption in the criminal justice system in Mississippi. But he does it in a polite, non-confrontational manner opposite the stereotype of an ambush interviewer.

He's worked for justice for African Americans in the spirit and tradition of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. But his foundation is not in his own good intentions. He sees himself as a humble instrument in the hands of God.

In an age of relativism, he believes in absolute truth and standards of justice that don't shift according to someone's subjective preferences of the moment.

The award-winning reporter for the Jackson Clarion-Ledger is visiting Indianapolis this week to speak to the Pulliam Fellowship summer interns at The Star. Though accustomed to writing the news, Mitchell has become the subject of stories in recognition of his investigative reporting. His stories have prompted a series of new investigations and trials for crimes that were never brought to justice. Edgar Ray Killen, for example, was recently convicted for his part in the 1964 slayings of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner.

Mitchell has attracted substantial praise. He's won the Sigma Delta Chi Award for Public Service and the Heywood Broun Award, among others. But critics accuse him of trying to sell sensational stories by bringing up old wounds from Mississippi's past.

Mitchell might fit one stereotype of a typical investigative reporter. "His cubicle's a mess," says Sherry Ricchiardi, who teaches journalism at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis. She recently authored an in-depth profile of Mitchell for the American Journalism Review. "When you walk into his cubicle area, it's overflowing with stacks and stacks of newspapers and files and everything else."

Though seemingly disorganized at the desk, his stories carry weight with prosecutors in Mississippi and have prompted them to take another look at a number of old crimes because of the new evidence he has uncovered.

Sometimes he thinks of himself as a dinosaur, because he is trying to follow a journalistic tradition of "muckraking."

"The original concept was that people did really tough investigative reporting trying to change society for the better," he says. He prefers the long, diligent search for the facts, rather than an emphasis on celebrity news and gossip. He comes to that approach by way of his Christian faith, which is not found in abundance in the mainstream news media.

He doesn't like to be put in a spiritual or political mold either, in an interesting contrast to conservative Christians aligning with Republicans and helping them win Congress and the White House in recent elections. "If you look at Jesus' apostles, he had Matthew, who worked for the government, and Simon the Zealot, who was for the overthrow of the Roman government. That's as far apart politically as you can get. As Christian disciples we are all under that umbrella."

What he gets from the Bible is not so much a partisan political agenda as the principle of justice. "What made these killings in the 1950s and 1960s more egregious is the fact that everyone knew they were getting away with murder," he says. "Justice is important to God, and that's why it's important to me."

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EXPRESSO

A quick shot of opinion from The Star Editorial Board and local columnists

Heavy reading

I was happy to read the first four Harry Potter books aloud with my son, who went on to devour them several more times alone. But when book five, "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," came in at 870 pages, he was on his own. Doesn't J.K. Rowling have an editor, I wondered. The first book was perfect at 309 pages. Someone got the message. The new one, "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," is "only" 672 pages.

The length of the books also makes it

Murphy

tough for visually impaired kids to tote around a copy. The National Braille Press is printing "Half-Blood Prince," and its version runs 1,100 pages in a nine-volume package that weighs over 11 pounds. Previously, blind children had to wait three months or more for a Braille copy. But NBP got permission to start printing "Half-Blood Prince" earlier; it should be in kids' hands just three days late, Newsweek reports.

Thanks to NBP and a generous donor, a Braille edition that costs $62 to produce will sell for the standard $29.99. NBP says such a literary phenomenon as Harry Potter encourages more blind kids to read. And even if they need a suitcase to carry it around, blind readers get to experience Harry mania this time while the book is still fresh.

— Beth Murphy

Ah-nold

Gov. Ah-nold Schwarzenegger is in the media crosshairs for accepting millions of dollars from fitness magazines for being a consultant.

I just spent an evening with Ah-nold in June. Well, not really an evening. It was more like 20 minutes as he gave a speech to a group of cartoonists at a convention in Sacramento.

Ah-nold reminded us cartoonists that he doesn't take his $175,000 a year

Varvel

salary as governor because he already has enough money. So what is the problem with the consulting money, which amounts to $5 million over five years? The magazines get a lot of their profits from advertising for performance-enhancing supplements. Last year, Ah-nold vetoed a bill cracking down on the use of these supplements in high school sports. He says the bill focused erroneously on dietary supplements rather than on steroids. To the media it looks like his decision was based on pumping up his bank account.

— Gary Varvel