

“The Arc of the Moral Universe Bends Toward Justice”

We Need to Help Make That Happen

Four centuries have passed since my ancestors arrived here in chains. As the founder of the largest Black-owned company in the United States, I have been deeply blessed. My abundant blessings, however, have not been universal in our Black communities. I believe that God evenly distributes individual talent; opportunity however is not equally given to everyone in this world. My story, the exception not the rule, means we in America still have a long way to go if we are to dismantle racism. It is a persistent and corrosive problem that we must relentlessly address and eradicate for future generations.

Growing up as a Black citizen comes with a unique set of challenges, the most difficult of which is many times being judged simply by the color of one’s skin. This is an unfortunate reality that persists even today. Being a Black parent means having conversations with your children that should never have to occur in a just world but are necessary for survival. I am grateful to my parents for guiding me in the practical matters of life and instilling in me a love for God and His Word. They taught me that hatred begets hatred, but God’s love conquers all. My Christian faith has brought me to a point where I am seeking an “eternal return on investment” and working to leave a legacy rooted in that faith.

I grew up on a small farm on the outskirts of Clinton, Missouri. We lived on the other side of the tracks in a segregated town, common for Blacks in the 1950s. Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 meant that our town integrated its schools in 1957, the year I started first grade. The Ku Klux Klan declared, “There’s no way that is going to happen.” But my dad decided there was nothing that would keep his children from receiving the education they deserved. So, he patrolled the town all night before the first day of school to make sure we would be safe. A father’s love knows no bounds and conquers fear.

I also saw the compassion my parents had for others. There were hobos who always came by our home near the railroad tracks. They didn’t look like us. I wondered, “How do they find us?” My mom said our house was marked, and they knew they could receive food at our home. Now, we were as poor as church mice. With eight mouths to feed, there weren’t a lot of leftovers. But mom insisted that we give them what we have in our refrigerator, and they would sit on our back porch eating the much-needed meal. Seeing this kindness, compassion and love extended to strangers was a lesson that this life is about serving others. It is about making a difference in this world, regardless of one’s skin color. It is above the condition of one’s heart. As my mom said often, “You might be the only Bible they see today.”

This spirit instilled by my parents is one reason why I am chairing the First Chance campaign for the Concordance Academy of Leadership. The Academy, a St. Louis nonprofit, is applying comprehensive education and behavioral treatment for those just released from prison and their families. This model is improving the quality of life for ex-offenders, their families and communities.

The typical person leaving prison is defined by horrific trauma at a very young age. Often, they have a history of severe mental health challenges, significant substance abuse, little high school education, few work skills or experience, few positive family role models or other support systems, and, the stigma of being a felon for life. More, six out of ten children of ex-offenders also will be imprisoned. That is a staggering statistic and a generational cycle we must break.

Concordance Academy bends the arc of these stories by reducing reincarceration rates by as much as half. Their work significantly improves lives which in turn improves the safety and well-being of our communities.

The business community must unite and support this daring and exciting initiative. Taxpayers benefit from the Concordance approach. It is estimated that for every \$1 spent on an Academy student, \$4.50 is not spent on apprehension, trial and incarceration. Who can reject this kind of leverage and success?

Black lives matter. Period. Black men are imprisoned six times more than white men. I see over-incarceration as a crisis created by centuries of trauma inflicted on generations of Black families, whose ancestors also were brought to this country in chains. We are seeing an awakening and a reckoning across this nation. It is a clarion call for all of us in the business community who have been blessed with privileges and resources to engage as never before. We need to unite behind Concordance Academy and take the success of the St. Louis experience to other cities. We can and will change lives, improve public safety and reduce taxpayer expense. Join me.

David L. Steward is Founder and Chairman of World Wide Technology, a systems integrator and supply chain solutions provider, serving many of the world's largest companies.