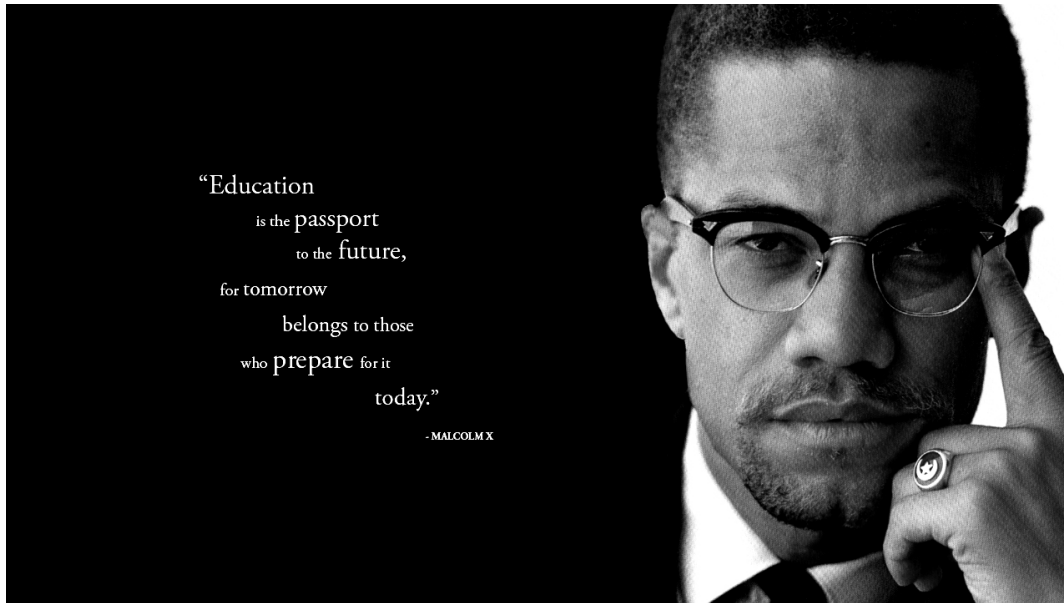


A Biographical Event: Malcolm X in Rochester

Written by Erica Bryant
Thursday, 30 May 2013 20:55



Fifty years ago today, [Malcolm X](#) was in town. He passed through Rochester (New York) frequently in that era, when African-Americans were fighting hard for rights that are taken for granted now:

The right to buy a house wherever you could afford. To have an equal shot at education. To close up the gas station where you worked without being beaten into paralysis by police who claimed you were robbing the place.

The beating of the gas station attendant, Rufus Fairwell, was one injustice that drew 800 people to a meeting on police brutality on Feb. 17, 1963. Dr. Walter Cooper, who chaired the meeting, saw Malcolm X in the crowd at Baden Street Settlement Center and asked him to speak.

"If we lived in a more humane and enlightened society, (Malcolm X) would have been a nuclear physicist," Dr. Cooper said on Wednesday. "This is the kind of mind he had." Mid-20th century America did not feel humane or enlightened if you were Black, so Malcolm X spent his life

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fighting.

“My people have caught hell long enough,” Malcolm X told the crowd at the Feb. 17 meeting, according to a Democrat and Chronicle story published about the meeting. “You do not get anything by being polite ... the only time you get something is when you let the man know you are fed up.”

For this visit to Rochester, and several others, he would stay at the Greig Street home of Constance and John Mitchell. Constance Mitchell, the first woman and first African-American elected in Monroe County, was a follower of Martin Luther King Jr.

Malcolm X believed Dr. King’s dream of racial integration and brotherhood was likely to stay a dream. Other local civil rights activists would gather at the Mitchell home to discuss and debate. Malcolm X, Mitchell said, always had a unique way of seeing things.

“He set about telling us the truth we didn’t want to hear,” she said. Fifty years later, she concludes, “He knew America better than we did.” A block away from Baden Street Settlement, where Malcolm X spoke 50 years ago, there is a school named after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. With 98 percent of its students being eligible for free and reduced lunch and 98 percent of its students being Black or Latino, it is probably the poorest, most segregated school in the county.

There is no local school named after Malcolm X, who grew up in foster care because his father was murdered and his mother had a nervous breakdown; who dropped out of school in junior high and taught himself to be articulate by copying a dictionary during a prison sentence.

History holds him at arm’s length. But it also has proven him right. That is no reason that each generation should not work as hard as they can to make things better. “I am a firm believer that you can’t give up,” said Mitchell. “You can’t eradicate the problem, but I think you can make a change.”

To watch the video of the Mitchells, click here:

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<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20130216/NEWS0215/302160020> .

This article was written by the young talented journalist Erica Bryant. This piece was originally posted on The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle newspaper. Erica Bryant, a native of Rochester, New York. She writes a weekly column for the Democrat and Chronicle newspaper. Bryant graduated from Boston University, with BAs in English and French Literature. She was the recipient of the 2010-2011 New York News Publishers Association Award for Distinguished Column Writing. She can be reached at ebryant@democratandchronicle.com.