Tenth Grade Writing Prompt:
The Movement to Abolish the “N” Word

Some people contend the “N” word has absolutely no place in American culture. Others believe it is appropriate to use in certain situations and contexts between certain people. Recently, the NAACP held a symbolic funeral for the word, Ebony and Jet magazines (popular African American publications) ordered authors to stop using the word, and several cities proposed legislation to impose fines on people who use the word. On the other hand, many believe that the meaning of the word has changed in recent decades and is socially and culturally acceptable for use among African-Americans.

Write an article for your school newspaper discussing the meaning of the “N” word, and your thoughts on whether its use is acceptable in today’s society. You may use the following information, your own experiences, observations, and/or readings.

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- Mark Anthony Neal, Duke professor of black popular culture

"When whites use it (the “N” word), they use it to hurt. When the black community uses it, they disrespect themselves.”

- Mayor Kenneth Corley, Brazoria, TX

"That word reminds me of lynchings and black men disappearing in the night and all of the dehumanizing things that used to happen to African Americans. I think no one should ever use that word. I think it should be against the law.”

- Jennifer Lowery-Bell

“The word nigger is not in the African community a bad word. It's a term of endearment and I don't see it as derogatory or offensive.”

- Rev. James Meeks, Illinois State Senator

"That word can still start a fight… I still say it in personal conversation with my friends, I say it sometimes on stage at the comedy club and I'm not gonna make a promise that I won't say it again on television, but right now I just feel like people aren't responsible enough (to use it properly). There are certain things I've been through in the last year and there's certain things I've heard people say and also all of the older black women in my family... they really get on to me about it.”

- Dave Chapelle, Comedian, on trying to cut the use of the “N” word from his television show

Links for further reading:
http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/huston/060805
http://www.abolishthenword.com/mission.htm
Stomping the N-Word
Movement to Ban Slur Crosses Communities

By Avis Thomas-Lester
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The very mention of the word sends Jennifer Lowery-Bell's mind spinning back to a painful time.

"That word reminds me of lynchings and black men disappearing in the night and all of the dehumanizing things that used to happen to African Americans," said Lowery-Bell, 59, a black woman raised in the South. "I think no one should ever use that word. I think it should be against the law."

Long before music mogul Russell Simmons called on the recording industry last week to strike the N-word, Lowery-Bell of Largo wrote her governor, her county executive and her County Council member, asking them to help ban the six-letter racial slur. She's part of an upsurge of popular sentiment against the word, not only in the entertainment industry but in churches, schools and city halls.

The Rev. Grainger Browning of Ebenezer A.M.E. Church in Fort Washington has been urging his members to stop using it. Students at the historically black Bowie State University banished the word from two dorms and started charging those who use it $25 fines.

Nationally, the NAACP held a symbolic funeral for the word two weeks ago, part of its Stop Campaign to strike such language from the lexicon. The publisher of black magazines Ebony and Jet ordered writers late last year to stop using the word. The New York City Council passed a resolution in February asking residents to refrain from using the word. And tiny Brazoria in southeastern Texas tried unsuccessfully to pass an ordinance leveling $500 fines for uttering the word.

During deliberations there, black residents protested the proposed ban more vigorously than their white neighbors, Mayor Kenneth Corley said.

"When whites use it, they use it to hurt," said Corley, who is white. "When the black community uses it, they disrespect themselves."

His experience touches on the central paradox of the campaign to excise the N-word from common usage: The effort is aimed not just at shutting down racists, shock jocks and supremacists. It's also aimed at educating African Americans, many of them born after the civil rights era, who have adopted the word as an endearment.

There is a difference, said Leonard Young, 19, of Fort Washington: Racists end the word with an "er," African Americans end it with an "a."

"I don't think it's offensive," said Young, a black computer science major at Prince George's Community College. "It hasn't been offensive since slavery. It's only offensive when people of other races use it."

The movement to ban the word picked up momentum last year after actor Michael Richards's racist rant toward black patrons in a Los Angeles comedy club. It got another boost this month when shock jock Don Imus referred to the predominantly African American Rutgers University women's basketball team in racially loaded terms.
The fallout from Imus's comments led to the axing of his show on MSNBC and CBS Radio and prompted music mogul Simmons to call on recording artists to stop using the N-word, "bitch" and "ho" in versions of songs played on the radio and in music videos.

The Imus controversy also sparked conversations among African Americans over dinner tables, on lawn chairs and in church pews.

Young contemplated the matter while on a lunch break with Devin Tyler, 18, of Hyattsville, a business-hotel management major. Tyler, who is black, admits using the N-word with his black friends. He has also heard his parents say it but in a different way.

"My parents use it to talk about people who are doing wrong . . .," he said. "They use it about people who are acting negative."

Horace Avent, 39, a black security officer from Waldorf, said he uses the N-word "with the fellas when we are playing around." He doesn't feel he is being insensitive to his history. "It's a word, and I'm not offended by a word."

Marcia Harris, 38, is trying to combat that kind of thinking. Co-founder of the Web site Banthenword.com, the New York woman said she carries around a book with graphic pictures of lynchings and pulls it out whenever she hears an African American use the N-word.

"I show them those pictures of black men being lynched when you know the racists who did it were saying this word," she said. "This word came from hate. It was about hating us. It is not an endearment."

That sort of education, said Jahar Abraham, 39, of Southeast Washington, changed his mind.

Abraham, manager and promoter of the go-go band Familiar Faces, said he used the N-word until a mentor exposed him to its use in African American history.

"Some of these are kids who don't know their history. You know what MLK means to them? Money-loving killers, not Martin Luther King Jr. They took those initials and made them about how they feel," Abraham said. "That's what they do with that word."

In his book "The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why," The Washington Post's Jabari Asim traces the open use of the slur by African Americans to the late 1960s. He argues that the word, no matter who utters it, has "abetted our systematic dehumanization."

Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of black popular culture at Duke University, disagrees, saying African American artists use the word "to capture the complexity of black life." He said the real debate should be over "stopping the negative use of it."

"If you look at how black artists have used that word, historically, they have used it in creative ways, the same way black cooks have made chitterlings into a delicacy," Neal said.

But Browning, the Fort Washington pastor, said the wide usage in books, films and comedy acts -- including those of such black comedians as Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock and Dave Chapelle -- has desensitized young people to the word's ugly history.

Adults need to share their painful experiences, Browning said, recalling the slurs he heard as a 13-year-old in 1965, integrating a white high school in Hampton, Va.
"As adults, we sometimes shield our children about the pain of our history by not telling them," Browning said. "But they need to know. They need to know how that word has been used against us, so they will know that they should never use it."

At Bowie State, students and administrators decided the best way to stop young black men from saying the word was to ban it from their dorms and levy fines on those who use it. Artie L. Travis, vice president of student affairs, said students in the two male dorms voted for the ban two years ago.

"Part of what we are trying to do is prepare them for being out in the world and to teach them leadership roles," he said. "That word does not go along with those goals."

Tsion Bennett, 24, a communications major and spoken word performer at Bowie State who is black, said he does not use the N-word in his writing but admits to dropping it in casual conversation. "I can understand why, in an environment that's trying to encourage elevated thinking, you would say, 'Let's begin to distance ourselves from that word,'" he said.

Lowery-Bell said she decided to approach Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) after hearing about Corley's effort in Texas. "Governor O'Malley, a policy of this type will provide some healing and closure for African Americans," she wrote in February, sending copies to Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D) and council member Samuel H. Dean (D-Mitchellville.)

An O'Malley spokesman said the letter has been referred to the governor's legislative staff for further study. In 2002, while O'Malley was mayor of Baltimore, the City Council there passed a nonbinding resolution condemning the N-word.

"I don't think they took me seriously," Lowery-Bell said. "People tend not to think this is important. But to me and other African Americans, it is very important."

_Staff writer Lonnae O'Neal Parker contributed to this report._

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