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## **Observations Lead to Obligations, MSCC Black History Speaker Asserts**

Making an observation should lead to an obligation whether it is in a school, a neighborhood, a community, a nation, or the world, says author, filmmaker, and educator MK Asante Jr.

Speaking at Mid-South Community College's Ninth Annual Black History program on Feb. 6, Asante encouraged members of the audience to fill voids and create solutions where problems and challenges exist.



“When I see something that doesn’t exist, I have to create it,” he said. “When you see something in life and society that doesn’t exist yet...it’s because you haven’t created it yet. I’m sure if you just think about your life, your environment, or your community you can think about ‘How come we don’t have this?’”

Asante said he developed the mantra, “If I make an observation, I have an obligation,” while presenting a writer’s workshop in a Philadelphia prison.

“There’s the one guy in particular; his name was Jordan. His writing was amazing. He was gifted with the pen; he was masterful, eloquent, poetic. He just moved me so much that I wanted to see where he spent the bulk of his days and nights.”

Asante received permission to visit Jordan’s cell and became agitated when he couldn’t see a bed in it.

“I’m thinking, ‘Here’s this brilliant young man...a genius with a pen, and he’s being dehumanized. He doesn’t have a bed in his cell.’ I’m ready to go run and talk to the warden or something.”

When the prisoner noticed Asante’s irritation, he laughed. Jordan pulled out an unused, flimsy mattress and explained.

“He said, ‘It’s okay man. I have a bed; I just don’t sleep on it. I sleep on the floor; I sleep against the wall, against the bars, anything, but not on the bed.’”

Naturally curious, Asante asked why.

“He says, ‘Brother MK, I don’t sleep on that bed because I can’t trust comfort in a place like this. Comfort in a place like this numbs you to the reality of where you really are and why.’”

Asante said that conversation stays with him everywhere he goes.

“I started thinking about that and what that means, even after I left the prison. No. 1, it told me never be too comfortable with where you’re at; always keep you mind focused on the next level, that next step, that next goal.”

“And it also told me something as an artist. My question was, ‘What do you do after that mattress is removed, once you’re not comfortable and you want to do something, what do you do?’ I’m always looking for inspiration and mantras, and I came up with a mantra: If I make an observation, I have an obligation.”



***MK Asante poses with Shonnon Sims of the National Guard, Mary Toney of MSCC’s Board of Trustees, and Tony Wilson of MSCC***

It didn't take long for him to put his thoughts and words into action. Asante wrote a powerful, thoughtful poem shortly after graduating from high school.

“We never learned a lot about black history (in school). We didn't learn about black heroes, and we didn't learn about the history that is part of American history and world history. So I was always ignorant of it until I started reading and learning.”

“My first observation was that the school wasn't doing enough, so I wrote this poem, ‘Two Sets of Notes.’ I felt like I had to write something, not just for myself, but something I thought might help other people who were in my situation. And that pattern just kept evolving.”

Asante said all of his creative projects emanate from his mantra. His latest book, “Buck,” tells of Asante's tumultuous teenage years. He said many people have the false notion that he was naturally destined for success because of his many and varied accomplishments at such a young age (he's only 30).

“People assume, ‘Wow, you must have known what you wanted to do your whole life because you seem to have it figured out.’ That's the furthest from the truth,” Asante pointed out.

“When I was young, I was getting kicked out of school. Every school I went to I



***Asante talks with Nancy Hogan of MSCC's TRiO Student Support Services department after a diversity workshop***

got kicked out of, almost, except the school I graduated from. I was labeled a troubled kid, the kid that wasn't going to be anything. I had tremendous strife in my family, my community, my environment, my neighborhood, everything. My obligation was to write a book.”

Asante said he draws inspiration and motivation

from many who paved the way for his success. He cited Harriet Tubman, Carl Robeson, Oscar Micheaux, Ida B. Wells, and the women who made the “black freedom quilts.”

“When I look at black history, I get deeply inspired by all the other people who’ve transformed observations into obligations,” he said. “I look at people like Harriet Tubman. She risked everything to get her people free. Changing observations into obligations is a very important part of black history.”

He said the story of the quilt makers is especially meaningful for him.

“As an artist, I’m always thinking about impact. The first thing that I’m struck by is the resourcefulness of these women, the maximization of minimal resources. That’s been a staple throughout African-American history.”

Asante said the quilts were also beautiful, practical, and emancipating.

“Some of the women that made these quilts during slavery would actually embed special messages, symbols, and codes into these quilts,” he pointed out. “Sometimes they were maps that showed other enslaved Africans how to get to the nearest safe house along the underground railroad, or sometimes they were maps that showed you how to read the stars so you could go north and escape slavery.”

Asante said he is asked frequently if the African-Americans of today will build on the legacy of their ancestors and take it to new heights.

“There’s only one thing I know – that it’s in our hands.”

Asante’s appearance was sponsored by MSCC’s Predominantly Black Institutions Grant initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, in cooperation with the College’s Student Activities department, TRiO Student Support Services, and Title III grant program. He also presented morning and afternoon diversity workshops for MSCC employees.