

THE N WORD

POP CULTURE'S APPROPRIATION OF CENTURIES-OLD RACIAL SLUR DOES NOT DILUTE ITS POWER OR POISON



October 27, 2006-Aurora Beacon News

By Justina Wang-Staff Writer

It is a word that can shoot doubt though anyone who has ever questioned the power of words.

Six letters that contain hundreds of years of history.

It is also a word that pervades rap music, blockbuster films, stand-up comedy and even local school hallways. In the last few decades in pop culture, the word has been chopped up and manipulated, with alternate -gga or -kkuh endings, with descriptive prepositions and a host of suffixes.

The Beacon News published a column by a teen writer this month, which used a word that combines "white" and N- . The writer used the word - as teenagers in his and other schools do - to describe "white, middle-class suburbanite teenagers" who "sagged their jeans, wore outrageous jewelry and spoke with nauseatingly bad grammar" in an attempt to act like "stereotypical black guy(s)."

The word offended many when it appeared in newsprint.

Community activist Clayton Muhammad said the use of any form of N- is reprehensible.

"I know the pain of that word," Muhammad said. "I'm a black man, and that's what I've been through for 31 years. Because I know the history and I know the pain of it, I choose to stay away from that word."

At the same time, Muhammad says, he's seen the teens in his **Boys II Men** Fraternity "slip" on their MySpace Web pages or in phone conversations with his son.

Last Sunday, during a **Boys II Men** meeting, the black and Latino teens weighed in on the prevalence and power of the N-word. Nearly all of the 40-some members in attendance said they regularly heard the word spouted out by students of all races in their schools. Some admitted it had been part of their own vocabulary.

At the end of the meeting, several agreed to begin a campaign to encourage others to stop using the word. Muhammad, who is also the East Aurora School District communications director, said he and other community leaders are pushing local school officials to set up reprimands for students who use racial slurs.



"You take one step at a time," Muhammad said. "The long vision is to eradicate that word from your language. It's not going to be eradicated from the English language. We can't change history.

"And we want it in the dictionary. We want people to know. I want my grandchildren to understand the pain of what it caused - that one single word."

This is what **Boys II Men** members had to say on the topic.

On taking responsibility for the word ...



Reggie Shipp, a senior at West Aurora High School: "We can't really get mad at people of different races if they call us that when we call ourselves that ...

"I used to live in Geneva in the eighth grade, and ... when I was on the phone talking to my friends from Aurora, I used the word and probably the next day I did it again and I did it again.

"So one day my friend comes up to me in school and (uses the word), and that really hurts because you have this white kid coming around and saying N-. I was like, 'Don't ever call me that again.'

"The first thing that comes out of his mouth is, 'I heard you say it.'...

"He had to say he was sorry, but on our part, I had to say I was sorry, too, because I made him feel like it was OK for him to use that..."

On how they feel when they hear the word ...



Rene Salgado, a junior at East Aurora High School: "The thing that irritates me is when I walk down the hallways or after school in the fieldhouse, and I see some of my Latino brothers exchange the word.

"I sometimes go up and ask them, what makes them think they have the power to say it? They're like, 'Oh, he's my friend; I can do it.' "I hate when I hear it, and that's always the same things they tell me."

Josh Jones, a junior at West Aurora High School: "I was in this performance with a group called MWAH (Messages Which Are Hopeful) and each time they opened up the show, they opened it up with a racial conflict.



"As part of the racial conflict, me and a white guy ... would get into a dispute and racial slurs would fly. He would say N- and we were supposed to be acting but ... it really hurts. It burns deep."

On the meaning of the word ...



Samory Liggins, a junior at East Aurora High School: "People get N- and black person confused ... It just hurts me how people can put you in a group without even knowing you..."

"Words are the most powerful thing you've got and the way you use it, it's ignorant. And by using N- you're showing you're ignorant, and the person you're talking to - you're saying they're ignorant. It's a cycle that just needs to be stopped."

Jerrod Wilson, a senior at East Aurora High School: "I don't say the word ... because (I think about) my grandma - she's 68; she was born in Huntsprings, Miss. in 1938 ...



"I remember my auntie, just like a month ago, she was talking about how they were treated when she was in Mississippi, and I felt bad about it. I feel like every time I'm saying it, I'm calling them N-."

On eliminating the word ...

Matt "KnuYork" Phipps, a West Aurora High School graduate: "I really have never looked at (the word) because I was raised on the New York streets, that's all we say....



"As a rapper myself, I get my word out to everybody ... and yes, you will hear N- on (my CD) ... but I'm going to sit here and make a promise to all of y'all that from now on in all my rap, I ain't gonna say the word anymore."

Josh Pugh, a junior at Oswego High School: "If you don't respond to the word, people stop calling you the word. If people say, 'What's up, N-?' when I'm walking down the hallway, I don't respond. I don't look back there, because if you do that, if they see you respond, they'll start calling you that..."

"I turn around and I'm like, 'Are you talking to me? Call me by my real name, because I'm not a N-. I'm Josh Pugh.'"