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What black parents tell their children

After the Obama-Gates-Crowley "beer summit" at the White House ended, Ronald Walter, a black longtime professor of politics at the University of Maryland, said: "Black parents are using this as a case in point of what they have been saying all along" to their children, "Racism hasn't gone away." Children, and especially black males, "are likely to confront it" from police. (Washington Post, July 30).

By: **Nat Hentoff**, The Jamestown Sun

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And on CNN, Colin Powell chimed in with his advice to black children: "When you're faced with an officer who is trying to do his job and get to the bottom of something, this is not the time to get in an argument with him. I was taught that as a child."

Moreover, when President Barack Obama insisted that the situation surrounding the arrest of the Harvard professor was a "teachable moment," former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani said: "He's actually right. It is teachable." And Giuliani, customarily brusque, told people, including professor Gates, across the land: "Here's the lesson ... shut up when a cop is asking you questions!" (Fox News, July 31).

Clearly, Giuliani remains unteachable on this subject. As I reported during his dramatic mayoral career, none of his predecessors since 1958 (when I began covering City Hall) had so alienated black New Yorkers by urging his police to engage in large-scale stop-and-frisks of predominately black residents without charging them with a crime. For a time, he also refused to meet with black leaders.

As for blacks' encounters with police nationally, in 1995, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (before he became a household name) wrote in the Oct. 23 New Yorker magazine: "It's a commonplace that white folks trust the police and black folks don't. Whites recognize this in the abstract, but they're continually surprised at the depth of black wariness. They shouldn't be."

Apparently, Cambridge, Mass., police sergeant James Crowley missed that issue of The New Yorker.

In the same article, Gates added that "blacks — in particular black men — swap their experiences of police encounters like war stories." Almost as soon I got to know and hang out with black jazz musicians decades ago, I heard a lot of those war stories.

I hope, but am skeptical, that a lasting result of Gates' manacling will be the gradual decline in the number of these war stories. In all the continued coverage across the nation of the Gates bust, the one story that gave some substance to my hope appeared in the July 26 issue of the Long Island newspaper, Newsday: "Nassau, Suffolk cite training against racial profiling."

Reporters Zachary Dowdy and Rocco Parascandola told of how the "Nassau and Suffolk police departments said they aggressively work to avoid racial profiling through a medley of training programs and updates for officers."

In Nassau, along with 30 hours of training on cultural diversity in the police academy, a much more enduring practice is "data collection program that requires officers to note the race and ethnicity of motorists they stop on the road."

Detective Lt. Kevin Smith adds that this data is periodically studied to determine if the police department engages in racial profiling.

Furthermore — and I hope other police departments will take notice — Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy told Newsday: "Last year, for the first time, we completed a pilot program where we collected statistics to help identify a baseline for traffic stops and to red-flag officers who differed significantly from peers when making these stops."

What then? "We shared," said Levy, "these data with individuals who were above the norm, sought an explanation, and then possibly referred those individuals for additional training."

This postgraduate education for police officers, if extended nationally and to police on the streets as well, could eventually lead to fewer war stories among black males about the humiliation, and worse, of "Driving While Black."

I remember that several years ago, in New York City, one of the very highest-ranking officials at One Police Plaza, headquarters of what each mayor calls "New York's finest," was driving, in civilian clothes, a few blocks away from his office. He was stopped in his expensive-looking car apparently because of his color.

It was so commonplace a story that it only lasted for two news cycles.

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On the street where I live in New York's Greenwich Village, The New School university is on the corner. One morning, I saw two young black men, dressed like preppies. One was carrying a resplendent black briefcase, which I immediately envied, and the other was saying to him: "You probably don't have the receipt. When a cop asks where you got it," pointing to the briefcase, "give him the name of the store. They probably have a record of it."

In the increasingly culturally diverse Big Apple, those two students were quite conscious of "walking while black."

When he was led off his front porch in manacles, professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. reportedly yelled: "This is what happens to black men in America."

What nerve!