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Paul Fletcher is making an impact on society
Housing director says community key to progress

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Not long ago, while riding his bike across the country, Paul Fletcher asked himself "What can I do to make an impact on society?"

His answer came in his position as executive director at the Evansville Housing Authority, an organization he was appointed to head May 31.

The dreams and aspirations Fletcher has for EHA — a system that is already nationally recognized — sound much like those that affected him during his upbringing, when he sought equality, education and inspiration.

"I ask my staff to dream what the ideal housing would be for people with limited resources," said Fletcher. "Then, I ask, how do we make that dream a reality?"

"Most good ideas start with people in the community. We need to put aside our differences to work together to be a model for the nation."

Fletcher's ideal EHA board would consist of three of five members elected by public housing residents, with the remainder of the board being appointed to their positions.

"Residents know what's going on; they live there and can keep the board accountable," said Fletcher.

He said he would like to create a housing development that stimulates free enterprise.

"Residents of public housing could be encouraged to open their own businesses, things like stores, child care, a computer lab, education," he said.

Fletcher also has a goal of putting a computer in every unit of public housing, hooked up to cable.

"This would be done with grants, but is so important in a digital age," said Fletcher. "It would be their phone, educational resource, social service hookup, checking account — do it all."

Training residents in technology also would lead to better-paying jobs, he said.

"Higher paying technical jobs — and a better standard of living — come with better computer training," he said. "Software development is where the market is going. It's easy to get the hardware — harder to get the teachers."

Overcoming adversity has been a benchmark of Fletcher's life.

A product of the turbulent '60s, Fletcher experienced firsthand the events that shaped history — and his personal world.

"I've sat at the table and stared history in the face," said Fletcher, 52, speaking of his father, Arthur, who had his hands in everything from influencing affirmative action to making a run for the U.S. presidency in 1992.

Beginning in Topeka, Kan., the Fletcher family became involved in the civil rights movement, Paul Fletcher said, with his father's involvement in Brown vs. Board of Education.

The Fletcher family was "run out of town" for its participation in Brown and other political efforts and settled in California, said Fletcher.

More adversity followed.

"My mother committed suicide when I was 12; she jumped off the Bay Bridge. Dad was left to raise five kids — alone," said Fletcher, who is the fourth child.

"A woman named Iedal Davis took me in. I was friends with her son, Robert, one of her 11 children.

"She called me into her house one day and said, 'Another plate on the table don't mean nothin' to me. I got nine girls who do the cookin'.

"You and Robert chop wood and clean the car. I don't want you — or your brothers or sisters — to ever go hungry or be without a place to sleep.'

"I spent a lot of time there; they were my extended family," Fletcher said.

Robert went on to become heavily involved in drugs and crime, spending a lot of time in the penitentiary, said Fletcher.

For a short time, Fletcher said he found himself following the same dead-end path. "I was mad and had a lot of anger," he said.

He attributes the positive turn in his life to his involvement in the civil rights movement.

At Mel's Drive-in, a local hangout in Berkley, Calif., Fletcher said he had a bitter taste of social injustice when he was 15.

"In 1964 this was a place where blacks could only work, and not be a part of the scene. The same guys that I was playing football with at high school were spitting at me from the hoods of their convertibles," he said.

A fight broke out and he spent a year in juvenile detention. "While there, a counselor asked me if I'd ever heard of the NAACP. I hadn't, but he sparked my interest."

Influenced by Malcom X and Frederick Douglass' writings, Fletcher realized his life could change through education.

Those dreams of improving his life took him to Seattle, where his father lived.

Fletcher participated in civil rights protests.

Said his father, who was on the city council: "I was on the inside writing rules and regulations that would pave the way for overcoming. Paul and his friends were outside walking around the building.

"He found himself in a crack between his father, who was championing American capitalism, and his sidewalk peers who were against people like me. Two or three times his friends said they'd kill me."

Arthur Fletcher, now 77, lives in Washington, D.C. He is the chairman of the National Black Chamber of Commerce and appears in blackvoices.com's "Pillars of a People" list of 100 African-Americans who most influenced the 20th century.

"While my dad was the director of the United Negro College Fund, he coined the slogan 'A mind is a terrible thing to waste.' He also developed many affirmative action laws, which still affect the makeup of the work force," Paul Fletcher said.

Both Fletcher and his father have been heavily involved in community service and politics.

"I've been from the outhouse to the White House," he said, referring to the help he gave his father in several runs for governmental offices, including a challenge against former D.C. mayor Marion Berry.

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