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## **Gates' Message One Of Inspiration**

### **Harvard Scholar's Hero Was W.E.B. DuBois**

By REGINE LABOSSIÈRE  
Courant Staff Writer

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MANCHESTER -- Using humor, acclaimed author and scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. talked Thursday about how his educational opportunities and his hero transformed his life.

Gates, the W.E.B. DuBois professor of humanities and director of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, spoke to a full room of students and guests at Manchester Community College's SBM Charitable Foundation Auditorium in honor of Black History Month.

"I have a special place in my heart for people who go to community colleges and for people who teach at community colleges," said Gates, reminiscing about his year at a community college near his hometown in West Virginia before transferring to Yale University.

"While my friends wanted to be Hank Aaron and Willie Mays, I wanted to go to Harvard or Yale and be a Rhodes Scholar," Gates continued. "... If I can do it from the hills of West Virginia, you can do it from Manchester, Conn."

Gates said that affirmative action allowed him to enter Yale, where he was one of few black people. He said he needed a hero and he found DuBois, the civil rights activist, sociologist and educator who was labeled a radical and died in self-imposed exile in Ghana in 1963.

Gates called DuBois "the greatest black intellectual in the history of our people" and used his study of and respect for DuBois to highlight what has, so far, been one of Gates' greatest professional achievements.

"He felt that racism was a function of ignorance," Gates said of DuBois, who awoke from a dream in 1909 wanting to create the Encyclopedia Africana to educate the world on black people and culture.

Despite DuBois' many attempts to get funding, the original encyclopedia was never published. There were several reasons for that, Gates said, and one was that DuBois wasn't always easy to work with.

"W.E.B. DuBois was the most arrogant Negro on the face of this earth. He slept in a three-piece suit," Gates said, eliciting laughter from the audience. "He thought he was

the Negro."

Gates has earned several degrees and has written such well-known books as "America Behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans" and "Finding Oprah's Roots." The latter and an accompanying one-hour documentary are coming out this month.

But what he is really proud of achieving, he said, is co-editing "Encarta Africana" and "Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience."

His efforts to finish what DuBois started took him and a couple of friends 25 years but they helped complete his hero's dream in 1999.

"The good Lord smiled upon me and my friends and put it upon me to finish the encyclopedia in his good name," Gates said.

Those who attended the event said Gates was inspirational for understanding and living through the struggles of a black American and for achieving his aspirations.

"He was such a loquacious speaker, funny and a modern-day bundle of history," said Phyllis Perry, who left work to see Gates. "He's carrying on the dream and he's realizing a goal."

Student Gladys Muriithi from Kenya said she respected Gates' willpower.

"He didn't give up, he kept on it," Muriithi said. "I appreciate that he accomplished what he wanted to achieve."

Contact Régine Labossière at [rlabossiere@courant.com](mailto:rlabossiere@courant.com).

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