

02/09/2007

Professor, author Henry Louis Gates Jr. visits MCC

By Christine McCluskey , Journal Inquirer Staff

MANCHESTER - One day in 1909, W.E.B. DuBois woke up with a vision of what he believed would be the most effective way to end racism against blacks: to publish "the equivalent of a black Encyclopedia Britannica," Henry Louis Gates Jr. told the crowded audience in Manchester Community College's auditorium Thursday.

At the other end of the 20th Century, 90 years and many false starts and challenges later, Gates and his colleagues brought out on CD-ROM the "Encarta Africana," a comprehensive, multimedia encyclopedia whose users can see Malcolm X give a speech, listen to the national anthems of African countries, and watch a giraffe give birth.

"Just think if we had had this when we were kids," Gates said.

Gates, the W.E.B. DuBois Professor of the Humanities and Director of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, talked about his own life and the life of DuBois, whom he called his hero and "the greatest black intellectual in the history of our people."

His visit to MCC was part of the college's Black History Month celebrations, which continue through the rest of February.

Gates is a friend of MCC Professor Lucy Hurston, whose aunt was Zora Neale Hurston, author of "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and, Gates said, the greatest black American novelist. Gates told the audience Thursday of his upbringing in West Virginia, where he attended Potomac State College for a year before he was able to transfer to Yale University. He said that Potomac State was similar to MCC.

"I have a special place in my heart for people who teach at community colleges and people who study at community colleges," Gates said.

When he transferred to Yale in 1969 he was one of only 96 black students on campus. Only six black men had been in the class of 1966, all of them from wealthy backgrounds, Gates said.

He talked about how he supports affirmative action because he benefited from it so much.

Without it, he wouldn't have been admitted to Yale because his father was not rich, he said.

Opposing affirmative action now "would make me a hypocrite as big as Mr. Justice Clarence Thomas, and I am not that kind of person," Gates said to applause.

Gates is the author of a book and a one-hour documentary released this month both titled "Finding Oprah's Roots," which traces the genealogical and genetic heritage of Oprah Winfrey. His other books include "America Behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans," "African American Lives," and "The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin," and he wrote and produced last year's "African American Lives" PBS documentary, which used genealogy and science to explore black American history. A four-hour sequel to that documentary is scheduled for broadcast next year.