

An icon means business in attacking 'ghetto culture'

By David Nicklaus

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Earl Graves Sr. has been preaching the empowerment gospel since he founded Black Enterprise magazine in 1970.

In issue after issue, and speech after speech, the publisher tells his audience about the importance of saving and investing, reducing debt, getting an education, owning a home and starting or running a business. Recently, he's added a new theme: speaking out against the elements of "ghetto culture" that keep young people from hearing the empowerment gospel.

"We must take back our race," Graves repeatedly told a largely African-American audience Friday in St. Louis.

Graves, who built a business around celebrating African-American success stories, said he's always been optimistic that future generations will accomplish even more than his own. But, he said at a community breakfast sponsored by Edward Jones, "My confidence in that outcome has been progressively dampened by cultural forces that ... celebrate and promote criminality, ignorance and indecency."

Graves took a personal stand against indecency last year when, at an event sponsored by Black Enterprise, he pulled the plug on comedian Eddie Griffin's microphone. The confrontation cost \$35,000, because Griffin had already been paid for his performance, but it was worth it, Graves said:

"It was beyond inappropriate, and I put a stop to it. It wasn't just about Eddie Griffin the comedian, it was about Black Enterprise and the standards we seek to uphold."

Even to some of his contemporaries, the 73-year-old publisher's standards might seem old-fashioned. Everyone who works for his company, which also has Internet and broadcast operations, is expected to wear business attire. "We never embraced business casual because we believe there is nothing casual about business," Graves said.

But this grandfather of five is more than a fuddy-duddy reacting to young people's baggy pants and body piercings. The message, Graves says, shocks him more than the messengers. "How can our young people excel if they're immersed in a culture that expects the worst of them, a culture that embraces the criminal and mocks the scholar?"

Graves is certainly not alone in this campaign. Other prominent African-Americans, including comedian Bill Cosby, have used similar language in speaking out against ghetto culture. But James Buford, president of the Urban League of Greater St. Louis, says it was important for the local audience to hear it from a respected business leader.

"It was encouraging to hear him saying it in that forum, in a business setting with the sponsorship of a financial firm like Edward Jones," Buford said after Graves' speech. "He had a captive audience of people who can make a difference."

Those last three words — make a difference — are the link between Graves' new message and his older ones about entrepreneurship and financial independence. He emphasized to his listeners the need to

influence their own children, grandchildren and employees, and to get involved in mentoring programs like one sponsored by the National Urban League.

Graves also called for a boycott of advertisers that support offensive entertainment programming. "We must take back our humanity from those who profit by exploiting it," Graves said.

That may sound like the rallying cry of a radical politician, but it comes from a mainstream business person who sits on the boards of AMR Corp., the parent of American Airlines, and insurance giant Aetna.

Other people speaking about this issue, such as Cosby, may get more publicity, but Graves has a way of getting things done.