

**"Akeelah and the Bee' Relates Important Messages about Perseverance,
Individual Drive and Community Involvement"**

by
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"Be" is a powerful word for our major religions. "Let there be light," for example, one of the first lines of the Old Testament, heralds our world's creation.

Then there is "bee" - as in spelling bee. For one little girl in a fascinating new movie, the word creates an avenue toward building an empowering future.

"Akeelah and the Bee," starring Laurence Fishburne, Angela Bassett and newcomer Keke Palmer, tells the story of a young girl from South Central Los Angeles who rises from modest means to compete in the National Spelling Bee. Highlighting the power of words and knowledge mixed with the spirit of competition, the film illustrates how far individual achievement and community support can take someone and creates one of the most powerful films in years.

One message black Americans should take from "Akeelah" is that everyone from the family to the community as a whole should help those seeking to achieve worthy goals. In the case of young Akeelah, it was mastering words and language. In the real world, the goals may include someone completing high school or college, developing a community assistance program or starting a successful business.

As a community, we should not just be willing to give people a push. We must also keep pace beside motivated individuals - pulling them when necessary.

In "Akeelah," viewers are reminded that this pushing and pulling is not always enough—just like in real life. Drawing from the wisdom that one must be an arm's distance to drive a nail with a hammer, those who really want to make a difference may even wish to uproot themselves from a comfortable suburban existence to resettle in the inner-city.

Another key point of "Akeelah" is that we must not sell short the need for human infrastructure. In fact, it is sometimes more important than physical infrastructure. Four hundred years of survival and growth in America, in and of itself, speaks volumes about the intellectual capabilities of blacks. The character of Akeelah provides an example of what a little nurturing can do in creating a superior individual.

The nurturing that helped Akeelah on screen is not just a thing of fantasy. Such nurturing can occur right now in places as diverse as dilapidated slums to the most posh suburbs.

In the movie, it is both unfortunate and fortunate that the gifted Akeelah must rise from the very bottom to reach the very top. It is unfortunate because, in the 21st century, black Americans are still finding themselves at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. But it is fortunate because it shows that America is still a place where someone of Akeelah's position can overcome great obstacles with knowledge, faith and support.

And despite the fact that Akeelah knows the smell of rot at the bottom, her character still possesses the ability to later appreciate the crystal-clear air at the top while maintaining the personal strength to not become intoxicated by it.

"Akeelah and the Bee," although a mix of fact and fiction, provides a real recipe for success. The ingredients are the words (spelled correctly, of course) that form the ideas that evolve, with the help of community, into productive actions. Those actions can begin with excelling in education and advance to helping rebuild our communities and ultimately reshaping our world.

Identifying the correct words, fashioning the perfect ideas and bringing them to life may not always be easy, but it was never easy for Akeelah when she competed in those bees on the silver screen. And the bee helped her be the best person she could be.

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