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## Struggle continues, even without defining moments

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The Kansas City Star

For 400 years, from the time the first slave ships landed in Jamestown, any talk of the black experience in America came during a time of slavery, Jim Crow segregation or the civil rights movement.

Finally, that has changed, says **Tavis Smiley**.

"This is the first generation of black people in this country without one of those defining moments," said Smiley, a political commentator, talk show host and award-winning author who will moderate a workshop as part of Kansas City's King Celebration.

That is why education and African-American history are more important than ever, Smiley said, because young people - as black families increasingly join the middle class and move to predominantly white suburbs - can no longer look around and see the struggle.

But Smiley is quick to add,

too, that having a "post-civil rights" generation in no way suggests that the country's race relations have improved to a point that lacks urgency.

"Access and opportunity have increased (for African-Americans), but education, criminal justice and economics still lag far behind white Americans," Smiley said recently by telephone from his office in Los Angeles.

Arlana Coleman, chairwoman of the youth workshop committee, said Smiley's appearance in Kansas City should be a popular attraction because of his television notoriety and his regular appearances on the Tom Joyner radio program, heard locally on KPRS.

"His message to youth - that they can achieve - is very positive," Coleman said. "He seems to speak their language."

Smiley, 42, was one of 10 children in a Gulfport, Miss., family. Two events in his life seemingly directed him to the activist

role he plays today.

The first was when, as a young boy, he and his sister were berated in front of his church congregation for supposedly causing a disturbance in Sunday school. The children's father, a non-commissioned Air Force officer, was so angered by the misbehavior that he reportedly beat the two so severely they had to be hospitalized.

The second event occurred when Smiley attended Indiana University, where he was involved in student government. When a black friend was killed by white police officers, Smiley helped lead protests because he thought the police acted wrongly.

Smiley nearly dropped out of school at that point, but instead began an internship as an aide for Tom Bradley, who had been elected as the first African-American mayor of Los Angeles.

It was a failure that spurred Smiley toward career success. He ran and lost

for a seat on the Los Angeles City Council. But he then became a radio commentator doing daily segments called "The Smiley Report." The success of that initial venture led to a subsequent talk show that focused on race and politics.

By the mid-1990s, Smiley's emerging reputation as a political observer earned him numerous appearances on national networks, such as ABC, MSNBC and CNN.

In 1996, he began hosting "BET Tonight," a public affairs program that tackled issues ranging from politics, race relations, R&B music, the hip-hop culture and Hollywood gossip.

The program was tremendously popular, but in 2001, BET surprisingly declined to renew Smiley's contract. Apparently, the flap was over an interview that Smiley landed with Sara Jane Olson, a former member of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Smiley sold the interview to ABC, angering his bosses at BET.

He later hosted "The **Tavis Smiley** Show" on NPR, but gave that up in 2004 because he felt he wasn't reaching the audience he wanted.

He now hosts "**Tavis Smiley**," a late-night talk show on PBS. He sees the progress in his involvement in the two public networks.

"These are places that don't make a lot of room for black men like myself," he said.

Smiley is also the author of several books, including *What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing up in America* and *The Covenant with Black America*.

But for all his media success, honors and best-sellers, Smiley still enjoys his public appearances and visiting with young people.

"Particularly now," he said, "because this year, 2007, is the 400th anniversary of the first slave ships landing at Jamestown.

"There is no question we have made great progress since then. But the question is no longer now versus then. It's how blacks stack up against whites today."

**Tavis Smiley** will moderate a Youth Leadership Development Workshop as part of Kansas City's King Celebration. The workshop is closed to the public.

CorrectionA story about author and talk show host **Tavis Smiley** in the Jan. 8 Martin Luther King Jr.

special section incorrectly stated the radio station that carries the Tom Joyner program, on which Smiley is heard. The program airs on KMJK-FM 107.3.

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