



Justice League of Greater Lansing Michigan Reparations Scholarship Recipient — 2024

Joseph Pizzo • J.W. Sexton High School

What I Learned About Generational Wealth

This essay is about my understanding of generational wealth and how it relates to reparations. When my mother first asked me if I believed African Americans should receive reparations for the 300 years of enslavement and even more years of racist policy allowed by the American government, I immediately said no. She tried to explain why she thought it was important, but I still held the same opinion. Later, I thought about it and sent her a text to clarify my response. Here's what I texted her.

"I'm not against reparations, and if African Americans are given it that would be great, but I do believe that as long as we keep acknowledging all that divides us, all these race wars will continue. I believe the only solution is uniting, under Christ. I believe only a true relationship with Christ, will help us as a society find peace and prosperity and end division and chaos. This is of course, nearly impossible, but that is my belief and what I would advocate for."

After I received this essay topic, I researched a lot more and learned how generational wealth was formed and how it affects African Americans today. Slavery is a painful part of African American history and the elimination of slavery by the 13th amendment in 1865 did not erase its consequences. They are visible even now and generational wealth is one area of proof. Assets that were inherited from one generation to another define generational wealth. These assets might include investment funds, shares or stocks in a business or company, real estate properties such as lands, houses, and bonds. All of these create wealth that can be passed from one generation to another.

After the Civil War finished, General William T. Sherman gave out a Special Field Order that reserved land by the southeast coast to give to ex-slaves from Africa. This order was supposed to help them start fresh and create a life of their own. The "Forty acres and a Mule" order could have created lasting wealth for African Americans, but the "promise" was not fulfilled, and former slaves did not get their land. Although the promise would not have made up for 400 years of whites earning millions from slave labor and African Americans earning nothing it could have been a start. This issue worsened with segregation, housing and employment discrimination that limited the economic progress of African Americans and perpetuated generations of poverty even today.

My mother's grandmother lived in the segregated south and was only allowed a third grade education. She was a part of the great migration because of racism, but when she arrived in the Detroit, she didn't have anything and couldn't buy a home or live in certain areas. This is why my mom's mom, my grandmother will be the first generation to own a home that she can pass to the next generation, but the house is in Detroit, so it is not worth much at all. The historical disadvantages created by slavery, racial terrorism, segregation, discriminatory practices, and policies destroyed the chance for African Americans to gain and keep wealth until after civil rights laws were put in place in the late 1960s only sixty years ago.

When I finished my research, my mother asked me again if I think reparations can repair the wealth gap or what is my solution? I texted her, "I believe it can help but I think there are multiple factors to it that may be hard to overcome. A solution might be offering more education about generational wealth to Blacks, so they understand the value of property and financial wealth education plus making policies that support opportunities for Blacks that weren't available before.