

John Telford Media Questions

1. *You call yourself a teacher activist. What does that term mean to you?*

I am both an educator and a social activist. As a teacher, I have taught my students righteous activism and to become righteous activists, as well as instructing them in the relevant academic discipline. As an activist, I have used my classroom and my administrative positions and my newspaper columns, radio show, and now my book to inspire my students, colleagues, constituents, and readers/listeners to become socially aware as well as—in my students' case—academically grounded.

2. *Tell me about the influences of your father on the direction that your life has taken and the choices that you have made.*

From an early age, I was in awe of my fighter father and grandfather and followed their ancestral Celtic code without question. They were lifelong egalitarians and fought for the underdog; thus, I became a lifelong egalitarian and fought for the underdog.

3. *Who are your heroes and why?*

Over the span of seven decades, some of my greatest heroes have been my father, Robert F. Kennedy, Nelson Mandela, Emiliano Zapata, Mohandas Gandhi, Audie Murphy, Wayne State University track coach David L. Holmes, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Robinson, Jesse Owens, 1952 Olympic 400-meter champion George Rhoden of Jamaica, and 1956 Olympic 400-meter champion Charley Jenkins of Villanova.

Why? In the case of the first nine, including Ali, they fought indomitably for what was right. In the case of the athletes, including Ali, they had only themselves to depend upon in the arena, and they were very nearly invincible there—to the extent that even though I was one of the world's best quarter-milers, I found the last two very hard to beat (although I did beat them). Owens, Robinson, and Rhoden were my high school idols.

4. *You have often been considered a lightning rod for controversy in your role as superintendent. Recently, you were dismissed from your job as interim superintendent of the Madison Heights Schools. What precipitated this action and did the school board err in firing you?*

This action was precipitated by my aggressively recruiting hundreds of black students from Detroit and hordes of racist residents resultantly converging on the board demanding my dismissal. The school board unquestionably erred, because not only was I offering Detroit kids an avenue of escape from their failing home district and at the same time fostering racial integration, the insolvent Madison district needed the state funding that the Detroit students brought with them, and the state superintendent is now threatening the board with jail and fines for being in deficit spending for the past sixteen consecutive years.

5. *How do you feel the election of Barack Obama has changed race relations in the United States?*

It's not so much a cause as a positive result of that change. The millions of white Americans who voted for Obama clearly realize that judging a person's abilities by skin color is absurd. To the extent that Obama's election has changed race relations, that change may actually be more negative than positive, because it has galvanized some of the hate groups to step up their activities.

6. *What 5 things would you like to see changed about public education in America today?*

My main focus in my book is on urban education, so that's where I'll concentrate my five answers (not in preferential order): first answer: eliminate the public charter schools; second answer: redirect more money proportionally to traditional public school districts with the greatest social needs; third answer: isolate misbehavers in special classes until their grades and behavior improve and squeeze the financial balloon to surround them with remedial and behavioral support systems; fourth answer: establish stiff anti-nepotism clauses in hiring and promoting instructional and administrative staff; fifth answer: test administrators before promoting them and evaluate them annually once they've been promoted. Of course, I have a lot more to say regarding this, and I do so in my book.

7. *You have lived a full life, you have been a world class runner, you have taught in some of the most troubled schools in America, you have been a poet and a lover to many women, it is not surprising that you wrote a book, but tell us a bit about the process that you went through to write this autobiography.*

I am almost 74 years old and have been meaning to write my memoirs for a long time while I am still able. When I left DPS in June 2008, I had time on my hands and decided then to commit my life story to paper. I have included excerpts from

my students' writings in the book, plus snippets from my newspaper columns and treatises when I needed to use them to emphasize a point.

8. *Do you have any regrets or any unfinished business?*

Yes – I want to make my panoramic saga known, and set forth my ideas for reform to a wider audience.

9. *You are married to a black woman, has this given you a different perspective on being black in America and if so how?*

Not really, now in the twenty-first century – but it did in my earlier relationships with black women in the 1950s and 60s. The hate stares, and often the remarks we heard directed at us in public were vicious, and sometimes they got me into fights.

10. *Many people would be surprised to learn that you are white. Why do you think that you have such an affinity for black causes?*

Many people have been surprised to learn I'm white, because most world-ranked sprinters are black. My affinity for black causes originated with my father, who taught me to fight injustice as he did, and they originated with prejudicial and discriminatory incidents I witnessed over the years that were directed toward my black schoolmates, teammates, students, athletes, and friends—some which I describe in the book.

11. *If you could be known for just one thing, what would it be and why?*

That I tried all my life to right wrongs, particularly in regard to the under-education of black Americans.

12. *You have witnessed racial hatred up close. Why do some people become racists and others not? What are the roots of prejudice?*

The roots of prejudice in this country lie embedded in the ancient greed of the slave traders and in the rapaciousness of the Europeans who stole this land from the native Americans—and now, in current child-rearing in some families transmitting racism and other forms of bigotry. Babies aren't born with prejudice; they have to be taught to hate.