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COMMENTARY

LEONARD PITTS JR.



lpitts@herald.com

Knowing my past provides quiet joy

Let me tell you where I come from.

Born in Southern California, but that's not what I'm talking about. Both parents from Mississippi, but I'm not referring to that, either.

I mean before that. Before Mr. James Crow laid down his law. Before raiders and slave traders dropped anchor in West Africa. I'm talking about where my family began.

Let me tell you where I come from.

If you had asked me before, maybe I'd have done like Dr. Rick Kittles, codirector of Molecular Genetics at the National Human Genome Center at Howard University. When people asked about his family's origins, he would say they were Mandinka, Zulu, whatever came to mind.

But he got tired of making things up. Tired of not knowing.

I can sympathize. I listen to my friends sometimes — about Russian-Jewish forebears who came through Ellis Island, Irish grandparents who suffered at the hands of the British — and I wonder if they appreciate what a blessing it is to know the things they do. Or maybe you can't appreciate it unless you've never known.

Most black people never have. The information didn't make it to the ship's manifest, wasn't recorded in the master's ledger. Yes, our heritage is African. But Africa is a continent of more than 11 million square miles, almost 50 nations and dozens of ethnic groups. So the information is of limited value.

But now I can tell you where I come from.

Because Kittles started a company for people like me and him. It's called African Ancestry. You contact them online (www.africanancestry.com) and they send you a test kit, a cotton swab you run along the inside of your cheek and mail back.

The company has compiled a database of more than 10,000 African DNA sequences representing 82 African ethnic groups. Your DNA is matched against it. Six weeks later, you receive a packet telling you where your people are from.

There are two tests, one for maternal ancestry, the other for paternal. Each costs \$350, though there's a small price break if you order both. Company President Gina Paige says more than 200 people have availed themselves of the service since the company opened in February.

People, she says, tend to take a long time deciding whether to order the tests. She allows that part of the reason is because it's not cheap. But she thinks people also hesitate because it is such a big step. Because suddenly, they can know what never seemed knowable before.

And the results can change your understanding of who you are. "I've had a couple of people say they were absolutely speechless," she says. "Brought to tears. There are people who are elated with the confirmation of what they thought or what they had heard through their families. Then there are people who are surprised."

They would be among the 30 percent who discover that their male line traces not to Africa, but to Europe — an indication of the frequency with which slave women were raped.

Sometimes, what we come from is pain.

Ajamu Webster, a 45-year-old structural engineer from Kansas City, Mo., was thrilled to learn of his heritage among the Bamileke people of Cameroon. He had done a lot of genealogical research on his own, but this information, he says, "makes it real. It gives me a point of focus now."

So let me tell you where I come from.

On my mother's side, my people are the Songhai in Niger. On my father's side, they are the Mende of Sierra Leone.

Knowing that gave me a gladness that's hard to articulate. Like finding the jigsaw's missing piece. I felt a quiet joy. It made me want to know more. Made me want to go there.

I called my sisters and my brother 3,000 miles away.

Guess what I've got in my hands? I said. Guess what I just learned?

Let me tell you where we come from.