

27 Years Later, the Young Clearly Hear Malcolm X

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BOSTON, Nov. 12 — In a Roxbury high school near the streets where Malcolm X hustled away his adolescence, the 11 teen-agers in Steve Grace's history class sat straight and spellbound as the stark image of the black Muslim leader glowed from a television set up front.

The gaunt man in the thin tie and spectacles was talking to 1960's Harlem about how drugs were destroying the community, how they were flown in by outsiders and how blacks needed to unite against the scourge — words that could as easily have been said of 1990's Roxbury.

The teen-agers nodded their heads in both agreement and awe, then pummeled their teacher with questions and testimonials.

A Folk Hero

"You look at him, and you see how good of a man he was," Orlando Lang, a senior in the class, said with sadness. "He was taken away as if it was never meant for us to achieve."

For Spike Lee, whose movie debuts Wednesday, Malcolm X may be a career-defining project. For T-shirt makers, Malcolm X may be a bonanza and recessionary godsend. But to black urban teen-agers whose daily routines include dodging bullets and fending off crack dealers and gang members, Malcolm X is their folk hero, the resurrected spokesman for an angry, jaded generation.

Malcolm X, assassinated in New York City 27 years ago,

claims such status today because he was a blunt-talking black Everyman, a fast-forwarded, all-in-one version of black life in America, from poverty to street life to redemption.

In interviews with more than 50 inner-city teen-agers and young adults across the country, most spoke with dutiful respect for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were neutral on the Rev. Jesse Jackson, could happily tick off the names of their favorite actors and athletes — but reserved their most passionate words for Malcolm X.

"He stood up to the white man and he had dignity doing it," said James Fuller, a junior at Fresno State University in California. "He was well educated, that's why whites hated him so much. He was educated and didn't take no mess. If I was in those days, I would have to go with Malcolm."

Boost for Reading

To be sure, the familiarity of Malcolm X varies widely. Some young people have simply seized on his famous phrase, "By Any Means Necessary." Others are caught up in the rebel-chic X-wear.

Still others, however, seem unable to read enough about the man. Malcolm X has apparently done what literacy programs, bookmobiles, librarians, English teachers and Barbara Bush have tried to do for years — get urban

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