

Death often comes too early to those who achieve greatness

Scientist, playwright and tennis star met early demise

■ Word wonders what the world has missed.

I was channel grazing, flipping through the different networks. I paused momentarily on one station where Toni Braxton was in the middle of some mournful, melancholy song with lyrics that repeated: "Gone too soon.... Gone too soon."

I don't know the intent of the song writer or what the message was. But it made me think how those words rang true for at least three African-Americans I greatly admire who have indeed gone too soon.

I remember Dr. Charles Richard Drew with gratitude; a man whose life-saving idea continues to save lives everywhere.

Drew headed up the Emergency Plasma Program for England during World War II. When the U.S. entered the war, Drew was chosen to head the National Blood Bank Program, later called The American Red Cross Blood Bank. He was uniquely qualified for this job. During his internship and residency at Montreal, Canada's General Hospital, Drew developed an interest in the problems of storing blood for transfusions. Later, at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, he earned a Doctor of Science Degree for his research into the use of stored blood plasma for shock.

In 1950, Drew, the man who established the first blood banks,

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bled to death because he was in a car crash and was refused admittance to the hospital because of his race. He was 46 years old.

For me, Lorraine Hansberry's highly acclaimed play "A Raisin in the Sun" was riveting and heart-wrenching — more than just entertainment.

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In 1959, Hansberry received New York's Drama Critics Circle Award for the best play of the season. "A Raisin in the Sun" ran for 19 months on Broadway. Columbia Pictures bought the movie rights and hired Hansberry to write the movie script. The film won the Cannes Film Festival Award.

Hansberry was about 27 years

old when she wrote this play, soon followed by "The Sign in Sidney Brustein Window" and "Laughing Boy."

Hansberry was working on an opera when she became ill and died of cancer at age 35.

Grace and dignity rank high in my values system. Arthur Ashe had both.

Born and reared in Richmond, Va., Ashe made history for nearly 30 years, beginning in 1963 when he joined the U.S. Davis Cup Team as its first African-American tennis player until his untimely death February 1993.

At his peak, Ashe was ranked #1 in the world of men's professional tennis.

Ashe also authored several books.

"Days of Grace" was his last book. In it he tells of how he dealt with the medical blunder that caused him to get Aids; the life-long struggle with racism; and tender, touching words to his wife, Jeanne, and daughter, Camera Elizabeth.

In July, 1996, in Richmond, Va. a monument was dedicated to Arthur Ashe. It stands on a boulevard lined with statues of Confederate heroes; Arthur Ashe (1943-1993).

With life expectancy now into the late 80s, I often wonder what other contributions these three people would have made to America — and to the world — had they not "gone too soon."