

NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE CONFERENCE 2003

What does the Urban League do?

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Since its earliest days, people have asked, "What does the Urban League do?" Other articles in this supplement explain what the League is doing today, in terms of programs and services. This article, adapted from the epilogue to "DAYBREAKERS: The Story of the Urban League of Pittsburgh" by former League Executive Director Arthur J. Edmunds, conveys a sense of the League's mission and why it does what it does.)

A newspaper reporter knows that he has succeeded in covering a controversial issue impartially when both sides complain that he has favored the other—a negative measure, perhaps, but a realistic one. In most areas, including the civil rights arena, criticism is more common than praise, and the Urban League—like the newspaper reporter—has been attacked from both sides.

Back in the 1920s, the efforts of the League's first executive, John T. Clark, to involve the Negro steelworkers in the union movement so angered the mill owners that he was forced to leave Pittsburgh. Two decades later, the fury of Downtown merchants over the picketing of department stores cost K. Leroy Irvis, former Speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, his job with the League. In the 1950s, advocacy of fair housing and school desegregation caused a number of affiliates to lose their Community Chest funding and very nearly put the League out of business in Pittsburgh. Even today a strong stand on a controversial issue brings a barrage of angry letters to the United Way.

To some, the League is moving too fast.

But to many others—chiefly in the Black community—the League moves too slowly. Understandably impatient that this nation, in more than 200 years, has failed to make good its promises of equal opportunity, these critics are quick to blame the League for what has not happened and slow to credit it for its role in the significant changes that have occurred in the last 85 years. The problem in both cases is due, in part at least, to a lack of understanding of what the Urban League does.

Those who fault the agency for becoming involved in controversy fail to realize that effective social service is more than applying the Band-Aids of welfare or "charity." It is, more importantly, preventing the recurrence of problems by developing self-sufficiency and self-sufficiency for Black people means removing the artificial barrier of racial discrimination that bars them from equal access to good jobs, decent housing, educational opportunities and quality health and welfare services.

And those who criticize the League for a lack of militancy do not understand that any good army must be diversified, that behind the generals and the frontline troops (on whom the television cameras focus) stands an equally vital corps of soldiers responsible for developing strategy, carrying out intelligence operations and supplying the bullets, the food and the transportation. The latter role—less dramatic, less likely to make newspaper headlines—is the League's traditional role and the one it plays most effectively. The NAACP has been called the War Department and the Urban League, the State Department. Others have termed the League "the civil service of the Civil Rights Movement."

The League has done its share of marching. But the League has also negotiated the settlements; it has, through



LEAGUE LEADERS—Former Urban League of Pittsburgh leaders: Arthur J. Edmunds, executive director, 1960-1985; Leon L. Haley, president and CEO, 1985-1994; and Wendell G. Freeland, board president, 1962-1967.

careful research, armed the protesters with facts and figures, and it has identified (and in some cases, trained) the people to fill the slots—in businesses, in schools, in neighborhoods—that were opened up to Blacks. Through monitoring and follow-up, it has ensured that those promises were kept.

It is an undramatic role, for the most part—and one that requires a special kind of person to perform it: a person without a great ego need for applause and public recognition...Those who seek "instant gratification" will not be satisfied in the League or, for that matter, in social work. Tackling the enormous problems of poverty and racism, particularly in a time of dwindling resources, is a little like eating an elephant. You do it "one bite

at a time."

On the subject of militancy, no one has spoken more eloquently than Lester Granger who, on the occasion of his retirement, answered his own critics and those of the League:

"Militancy has an inner mean-

ing, which is far deeper (than picket lines and placards and the hurling of epithets and the denouncing of public figures). In such a sense it is determined by faith in a cause, by willingness to endure assaults instigated by opposition to the

cause, by determination to stick to a job until completed, and not to be distracted by glory parades and soft sit-out corners. In this sense I challenge any national organization in this country to match its record for militancy with that of our Urban League."

Another criticism frequently leveled at the Urban League is that it is "middle-class." If middle-class means having a professionally trained staff capable of articulating client problems and interpreting to them their rights and responsibilities under the law—or that the board includes many individuals, Black and white, who hold responsible positions in the community, then the League is, indeed, middle-class. That does not, in any way, suggest, how-

ever, that it does not effectively and sensitively serve the needs of the poor and, in fact, succeed in moving many of them—through education, training and placement—into the middle-class.

To K. Leroy Irvis, for example, that is the League's most important role and, he believes, "no other organization does it as well as the League." He bears no ill will toward the agency that fired him 35 years ago, on the contrary, he says:

"I am proud of the League today. It does an absolutely necessary job in moving Black people into the mainstream of economic America. Power in this country really depends on money, and Black people must get a structured middle-class established, a middle-class that has enough money to impact upon the general structure of the commonwealth and of the nation. And that's what the Urban League is really doing—building a structured, secure middle-class. Without that, we cannot progress."

Despite the critics and perhaps, in part, because they have forced the League to look at itself more objectively, it has—over 85 years, "one bite at a time"—opened doors for Black people in Pittsburgh. Urban League staff "alumni" have graduated to responsible jobs throughout the local area and in cities across the country, among them Irvis and first Black City Council President the late Lou Mason...And the League serves as a training ground for volunteers as well as staff. Among the agency's most distinguished board alumni are:

Former Gov. Dick Thornburgh and the late U.S. Sen. John Heinz, both of whom served actively on the board during the tumultuous 1960s, and state cabinet officers W.P. Young and Carnegie Mellon University professor, Myron Joseph. Literally hundreds of others carry—into their jobs, their volunteer work and their private lives—the basic lesson they learned at the League: that Blacks and whites can discover, through working together, a commonality that far transcends any difference in skin tone or hair texture.

The Urban League is, in every sense, a family, and every member of that family has affected and has been affected by the Urban League. The roots are deep and enduring, and some can trace their lineage literally to the earliest days. (Dr. Maryann Bishop-Coffey, for example, who has served on the board and who has shared generously her professional expertise with the housing staff, is the daughter of a board member and the granddaughter of Eva Hall, the staff member who recorded the earliest Advisory Council minutes. Elaine Coles, administrative assistant to Leon Haley, was with the agency for more than a quarter of a century, is the granddaughter of Rev. G.B. Howard, who presided over the League's predecessor agency, the Association for the Improvement of Social Conditions in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, and who was this Urban League's first vice president.)

Today's staff can see, in the efforts and ideas of their predecessors, the seeds of the work they are doing today. They take comfort in knowing that they are not the first to experience reversals in policy, not the first to see the budget cut at the very time when the needs are greatest. And they find in that the confidence to stand by the Urban League approach by understanding what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Urban League on air

The Urban League is both grateful and proud of its continuing relationship with Sheridan Broadcasting's WAMO-AM 860.

The bi-weekly radio show "Urban Reality," hosted by the League's President Esther L. Bush, is heard every other Saturday from 9-11 a.m. The live, call-in format enables the

Urban League to discuss topics that relate to the daily life of the community and to introduce the many who are acting to improve life in Pittsburgh or in other American cities and towns. The show has become a listening post for issues of concern to the African-American community.

Looking back at 85 years of progress

As I look back at the beginnings of the Urban League, told so eloquently by DAYBREAKERS, I can see the changes that have taken place in American society, as well as in Pittsburgh in particular. When the Urban League began in Pittsburgh in 1918, America was still an agrarian country with most of its population still living on farms, many without electricity or running water.

The first African-Americans who came to Pittsburgh at that time reflected the majority of rural Americans who came to the cities for the promise of jobs and all the enticements of urban life. What they found was far different than what they imagined. Crowded housing without proper sanitation, little or no opportunity for education for their children, no health care and long tiring hours at work with very little time off.

The Urban League was born to help these new migrants from the South. Shelter, sanitation, jobs and rudimentary health care were the basics provided by the League. Now, 85 years later as I look at my work and that of my two immedi-



ESTHER L. BUSH

ate predecessors, Art Edmunds and Leon Haley, I see both the sameness and the change.

The sameness is the struggle for jobs, affordable housing, education and equal opportunity. The change is in getting African-Americans the opportunity to serve on the boards of decision-making

bodies in corporate, public and philanthropic bodies that can make broad policy changes that will affect the lives of Blacks as well as whites. The change is in getting African-American students into college, and helping an entire generation of young families own their own homes.

The services are much the

same but the emphasis is different. The society has changed, African-Americans hold managerial and professional positions, they are respected leaders in their community, they own property. Yet there is much yet to be done. The proportion of African-Americans in positions of significant responsibility is low, the number of college graduates is very few, especially among African-American men. Home ownership and personal wealth trails badly behind that of whites, and most tragic is that African-Americans die earlier and in far higher numbers than whites of the same major diseases.

As we venture more deeply into the new millennium, the Urban League of Pittsburgh has a new vision for those we represent. It is a vision of expanded opportunity built on the foundation of achievement that the pioneers in the work of the League accomplished. It is the continuing realization of the dream of Martin Luther King Jr.

In partnership for a better future,

Esther L. Bush
President and CEO