

NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE CONFERENCE 2003

Urban League and Pittsburgh Courier share common history

Mention such names as Robert L. Vann, Daisy Lampkin and P.L. Prattis and most Pittsburghers who have even a nodding acquaintance with local Black history will associate them with the Pittsburgh Courier. The fact is, however, they also played a major role in the history of the Urban League of Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh Courier was in its infancy—just 5 years old, in fact—when its young editor, Robert L. Vann, together with a handful of other civic-minded citizens, formed the Pittsburgh Council for Social Service Among Negroes in 1915—the organization that evolved three years later, into the Urban League of Pittsburgh. The Council was concerned about the problems of migrants who were lured from the rural South to Northern cities like Pittsburgh by the promise of jobs in the mills and mines. Crowded unsanitary housing conditions and the difficulties the migrants encountered in adjusting to the unfamiliar urban culture posed a threat not only to the newcomers but also to the community, as a whole, Black and white alike.

According to Urban League archives, the Council learned about an interracial organization, the National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes (soon to become known as the National Urban League), in New York City and wrote to the League's executive secretary, Eugene Kinckle Jones, for advice. It seems likely that the connection came about through Vann, who was a close friend of Jones' and had spent much time during his college years at Virginia Union, at the home of Jones'

parents, both of whom were college professors. Pittsburgh needed an Urban League, and he returned as the new affiliate's first executive secretary. On Jan. 15, 1918—eight years to the day after the publication of the first issue of the



ROBERT L. VANN

Pittsburgh Courier—the Council voted to resolve itself into the Urban League of Pittsburgh. Less than a month later, Clark opened an office in a Wylie Avenue storefront.

Vann joined the executive board of the new Urban League in 1919, and he continued to figure in the agency's history for at least two decades. Just two years before his death, he enthusiastically joined in the League's plans to establish a camp for Black youngsters who were, for the most part, excluded from existing camping programs. (Of 12,000 Allegheny County campers in the summer of 1938, only 47 were Black.)

When a prospective site was identified in Raccoon Creek Forest, Vann immediately wrote out a personal check for \$60 to reserve it and promised to secure the necessary funds to support the \$9,000 budget from his philanthropic friends. His friends, unfortunately, were less philanthropic than he expected them to be, and the League was forced to abandon the plan for the year.

Thanks to the eloquence of League Executive Director Maurice Moss (who exacted \$3,000 in contributions from the Downtown Rotary Club) and the fund-raising efforts of a committee headed by Dr. Dudley King, Camp James Weldon Johnson opened the following summer and in the next quarter century, gave thousands of Black youngsters an experience they would otherwise have missed.

Ironically, the camp that Vann had so strongly advocated was named for a man for whom he had, to put it mildly, very little affection. Johnson had, at one time, tried to expel Vann from Sigma Pi Phi ("Boule"), and Vann—in turn—had, on several occasions, taken Johnson to task in Courier editorials for his role in disbursing the charitable funds of the Garland Fund.

The Urban League-Pittsburgh Courier connection does not, however, rest solely with Robert L., Vann. Veteran City Editor P.L. Prattis served for many years on the League's Advisory Board, and it was he who introduced Alexander (Joe) Allen to the community when he became executive director in 1950. Those were critical times for the League, which was on the verge of los-



ing its Community Chest funding, and Prattis told the audience that Allen's three academic degrees were less significant than the fact that he was a certified lifeguard. "If the Urban League of Pittsburgh needs anything at this point,"



DAISY LAMPKIN

he said, "it needs a life-saver." In fact, Allen did just that—literally and figuratively. He pulled the agency out of its funding problems, and with the support of Wendell Freeland, Rev. Leroy Patrick, Jim Jordan and a few others

succeeded eventually in integrating the Highland Park swimming pool. Prattis was on hand for the fireworks, watching from the sidelines with Centre Avenue YMCA Director James Burgette. Teenagers who were hurling insults and stones at the swimmers turned their attention to the observers—but, the Courier reported, decided that the two men were "so old that we wouldn't get any credit for whipping them" and left.

Nearly two decades later—in 1967—Prattis compiled a history of the Pittsburgh League, which was published in conjunction with the agency's 50th anniversary.

Funding was a perennial problem for the League—and a frequent one for the Courier. Fortunately, both organizations enjoyed the benefit of the remarkable fund-raising skills of Daisy Lampkin. In 1918, the Courier, in an attempt to increase its revenues by increasing circulation, offered a new car to the person who brought in the most subscriptions. "Aunt Daisy," as she was affectionately known, won the competition hands down but the Courier lacked the funds to buy the car. To appease her, they offered a check for half the subscription money she

had collected—but the check bounced. Finally, Vann paid her, partly in cash from his own pocket and partly in Courier stock. In later years she became a Courier vice president and one of its major stockholders.

A few years after the ill-fated subscription campaign, Lampkin joined the Urban League Advisory Committee, and at her first meeting volunteered to chair a campaign to sell 2,000 memberships. Two months later she reported that 1,832 memberships (at \$1 each) had been sold and set the next year's goals at 3,000. Then she took on the Black churches, whose contributions had been meager from the start. She organized the first "Urban League Sunday" and doubled the contributions of the previous year.

Best remembered today as a zealous fund-raiser, locally and nationally, for the NAACP, Daisy Lampkin learned her trade at the Pittsburgh Courier and the Urban League.

Throughout some seven decades, the League and the Courier "family trees" have intertwined. Together they have made—and written—a substantial chapter in the history of Pittsburgh's Black community.

Quarter Century Club

Pittsburgh birthplace of auxiliaries' creation

by Remeka Bryant
Courier Staff Writer

At the age of 88, Mahlon T. Puryear can be considered a walking textbook, filled with the history of the Civil Rights Movement as it relates to the Urban League movement.

The Baltimore, Md. resident has 63 years of service to the Urban League and is president of the National Urban League's Quarter Century Club.

He was introduced to the Urban League in 1940 when he was teaching carpentry and building at Virginia's Hampton Institute, now Hampton University. The university's president, Malcolm McClain, asked Puryear to serve on a committee that was trying to influence a ship building company to hire Blacks. Help was requested from the National Urban League.

It was through that endeavor that Puryear met Julius A. Thomas, director of industrial relations for the National Urban League. Puryear joined the Urban League and hasn't looked back.

His first professional job with the Urban League was as vocational guiding secretary. His mission was to work with colleges in the South to plan career conferences for students and faculty.

As Thomas was beating down barriers to employment in corporate America, Puryear worked to prepare college students for those positions.

"None of the [Black] colleges had been visited by recruiters from corporate America before 1950," Puryear said. "Their recruiters didn't know what the colleges were teaching...and the faculties didn't know what corporate America wanted from the students."

During his tenure with the Urban League, Puryear said, "I've held over 25 different titles, and I never held one for more than three years. Out of the 25, five were created specifically for me to get a certain job done." He added with a laugh, "And they never used the titles since."

In 1954, Pittsburgh hosted the National Urban League Conference. Puryear was there as conference cashier. When he came to collect money for the dinners from a group of about 49 people who had received their 25-year service pins, he was told to leave.

"When I went after the dinner to collect, they told me they had given 25 years of service to the League; couldn't they give us a dinner?" said Puryear.

They decided then to form the Quarter Century Club. Now the group, which meets once a year,

has more than 700 members and "now the dinner has corporate sponsorship. None of the members pay for anything," Puryear said.

He joined the club's ranks in 1965 and was elected president in 1997.

Members receive a ruby-studded service pin. Another pin—diamond-studded—is awarded for 50 years of service.

"It's something worth sticking around for," Puryear said.

There is no official group, however, for individuals with 50 years of service.

The Quarter Century Club meets "all over the country," said Puryear. "We don't have a speaker or anything like that. It's just a time for members to talk and fellowship with one another."

The group will have its dinner in Detroit this year, not Pittsburgh, because of the change of location for this year's conference. The conference was initially scheduled for Cincinnati but the national office decided to honor a boycott of the city called by Black residents frustrated by several incidents of police brutality.

The Quarter Century Club held last year's dinner in Pittsburgh, the city of its birth; and this year's dinner in Detroit, the home of its first president.

But make no mistake, Puryear, and other club members will be present for the conference in Pittsburgh. Just ask for "Mr. P." or "Doctor Puryear." After 63 years in the movement, "no one calls me by my first name."

Black Family: Building On Its Resilience

CONTINUED FROM UL-1

With those immediate needs handled, the center's staff helped Jerome get sole custody of his children, assistance in caring for two of the children and parenting help with the younger two.

When he found a new job, the staff helped him find subsidized day care and evening play groups for his children.

One year later, Jerome was in a secure full-time job and a house that was saved from foreclosure.

The Urban League of Pittsburgh operates two such centers, one in Duquesne and another in Northview Heights.

Lately, the Urban League of Pittsburgh has taken on an advocacy role through its Research and Public Policy Department.

4-star rating

The National Urban League has received a 4-star rating (the highest rating possible) from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent evaluator of charities.

In 2002, the department released the "Black Papers on African American Health in Allegheny County" in conjunction with the University Center for Social & Urban Research at the University of Pittsburgh.

The first of these papers revealed that substantial disparities exist between African-

Americans and whites in the area of health care. The second focused on sexually transmitted diseases among African-Americans. The third detailed health problems among African-American women between the ages of 35 and 64.

Stephen B. Thomas, director of the Center for Minority Health, wrote, "The Black Papers provide a framework for understanding how social context, public policies, the environment, personal health beliefs, discrimination in medicine and institutional racism all interact to produce an excess burden of disease among African-Americans in Greater Pittsburgh."

The Urban League is continually working collaboratively to effectively address the problems facing families.

A pivotal role in Freedom Movement

CONTINUED FROM UL-4

tion's financial stamina. In honor of Whitney Young, he established several programs to aid in the development of those who work for and with the League: The Whitney M. Young, Jr. Training Center, to provide training and leadership development opportunities for both staff and volunteers; the Whitney M. Young Jr. Race Relations Program, which recognizes affiliates that have done exemplary work in race relations; and the Whitney M. Young Jr. Commemoration Ceremony, which honors long-term staff and volunteers who have made extraordinary contributions to the Urban League movement.

Jacob established the League's NULITES youth-development program and spurred the League to put a new emphasis on programs to reduce teenage pregnancy, help for single female heads of household, combat crime in Black communities and increase voter regis-



HUGH B. PRICE

tration.

Hugh B. Price, appointed to the League's top office in July 1994, took over at a critical time for the League, Black America and for the nation as a whole. A fierce market-driven dynamic—best described as "globalization"—was sweeping

the world, fundamentally altering all economic relations.

Within the United States that dynamic was reshaping the link between the nation's citizenry and its economy, and at least for the moment, fostering enormous uncertainty among individuals and tensions among ethnic and cultural groups.

This economic change, and the efforts of some to roll back the gains African-Americans have achieved since the 1960s, has made the League's efforts all the more necessary.

Price, a lawyer by training, with extensive experience in community development and other public policy issues, intensified the organization's work in education and youth development, in individual and community-wide economic empowerment and in the forceful advocacy of affirmative action and the promotion of inclusion as a critical foundation for securing America's future as a multi-ethnic democracy.