

Keep The Medium Going, Says Publisher

"We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us."



The home of The Medium at 2600 South Jackson St.

"My mother was one of few women — Black or White — that I considered actually involved in the business of farming. I got a lot of my business drive watching her handle many business situations. In those days, running a farm the way they had to do it was really a business, and a very challenging one."

Bennett's mother was a typical Black parent who pursued her education as far as she could, instilled in her kids the value of getting an education, and believed the plight of Blacks would come with education, which is the way it is today.

Although she insisted that Bennett finish high school first, his keen sense of economic responsibility to help the family by going to school and working prevailed.

Bennett got a job at a neighborhood grocery store delivering groceries on his bike after school. And it was this experience that would later shape and influence his entire life. It was his first bout with racism — ugly, dirty racism.

One day as Bennett loaded his bike cart for delivery, a Black man who worked on a garbage truck tried to cash his paycheck at the store as he had done many times before. But this time young Bennett noticed a strange and fearful look on the Black man's face as he counted his money three straight times. Knowing he had been cheated out of his money, the man kindly asked the White store owner if there may have been a mistake.

The man became very angry, snatched all the money, pulled a shotgun on him, and said, "Anything I can't stand is a smart nigger. Get out of this store before I blow your head off."

The frightened man ran from the store, leaving all of his money behind.

Startled, confused, afraid and upset, Bennett knew he would never work there again — under no circumstances. "When he paid me my \$4.20 for the week, I borrowed \$10 more from an aunt and took the next bus to Florida. I didn't know if I was a smart nigger or not, but I knew I would run into him again — it would be just a matter of time."

After only a few months in Florida, Bennett realized he couldn't work, go to school and stay alert at night, so he left school for awhile. Repeated pleas from his mother to return home and finish school sent Bennett scurrying back to Georgia.

High school would set yet another experience Bennett would never forget.

Bennett had taken an early college entrance exam before he fled Georgia, and had unknowingly passed it, but was not notified because he was in Florida at the time. His mother was never told either. So early college was out.

He was an honor student and an outstanding athlete. While he was on a winning football team, he received inquiries from several Black colleges about a possible athletic scholarship, including one to attend his dream school — Florida A&M.

However, a lousy football team, military recruiters, counselors acting like military recruiters

and the fact he couldn't go to his dream school, landed Bennett a five-year stint in the air force.

"After all that discouragement, I decided to go to the air force," Bennett explains. "Many of our counselors for some reason pushed the military for Black men in the 60's. They knocked college, so very few of us went right out of high school."

One of Bennett's most painful memories in the military was having to sit on the back of the bus in military uniform, while traveling home. "Here I was dressed to serve my country and still had to sit on the back of the bus. Blacks were looked down on but we were still being trained to protect a country where we were not wanted."

Not only that, Bennett bitterly recalls being refused service at a restaurant in Jackson, Mississippi because he was Black.

White airmen with him obviously were offered service. However, feeling the situation was downright disgusting, the White GI's retaliated by ordering the food, refusing to pay and walking out.

Bennett's air force days, despite frequent encounters with racism, netted him an athletic scholarship to Everett Community College, after being named to the All-Service Flag Football Team.

During the first week of practice, Bennett busted his knee and was doomed from his dream of becoming a great athlete.

"That's when I reached the decision that mental preparedness can take the place of physical preparedness, but you cannot substitute mental strength for physical strength. I realized it was time to look further into the horizons of life than sports."

Able to keep the scholarship at Everett, however, Bennett put his mental strength to work and pursued a degree in psychology. He was on the Dean's List and was an all-around good student.

Bennett's early childhood dream of becoming a doctor shattered during the so-called riot years with the assassination of Dr. King and the constant harassment of Black political prisoners.

"I realized then that my dream was just a dream. And for a Black man, that dream could easily become a nightmare."

Bennett worked for the state as a juvenile counselor for awhile, before leaving after a discrimination suit he won against a White supervisor snowballed into a sticky, and nonetheless, shaky situation. Though nothing happened, Bennett eventually left.

"I enjoyed the rewarding experience of working with young people," he said. "But the state, being like any other business, has its problems."

By pure instinct, Bennett got a job at a local Black newspaper. He knew absolutely nothing about the business, but felt compelled to check it out. Fourteen months later, Bennett still knew very little about the newspaper business, so he decided to start his own newspaper — The Medium. He read many books and toured many major newspaper facilities asking all kinds of questions — he wanted to know everything about the business.

Bennett had no money when he started and times were hard. But he was smart, dedicated, determined, and had community support and prayers that shook Heaven.

"Different people have different views and philosophies about life. In the newspaper business, if you work for a particular paper, you almost have to share that paper's ideas, and you almost have to agree with the editorial policy of that paper," Bennett points out. "There's just no harmony without it. My outlook on life was different. So I started The Medium."

And now \$30 and a prayer have turned into one of the most successful Black businesses in the country. The Medium has expanded to the Tacoma area since it was founded just 13 years ago, is winner of hundreds of local and national awards for journalism excellence, and is the largest Black-owned newspaper in the Pacific Northwest.

The paper has its own printing press, a fully equipped print and photography shop, and a highly computerized newsroom. "Journalism is a highly competitive field," says Bennett. "And we have to keep up with the times."

Bennett quickly points out, however, that the key success to The Medium is to surround himself with the "best available talent with the proper chemical balance to be committed to the industry. That's how I would characterize my loyal and dedicated staff."

Bennett agrees The Medium is a successful training ground for a lot of journalists in different areas. "But if we don't train them — whether they know it or not — who will? Where else can Black folks get the training and skills in this industry other than here?"

He also attributes part of the success of The Medium to the community for its loyal support and strong roots and ties, and to those in the advertising industry, who may disagree with the paper's editorial policy, though many times controversial, but respect it and its readership.

Chris Bennett has his own publishing company, is a vice president of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, and a candidate for that organization's president this June. He holds impressive memberships in the NAACP, Sigma Delta Chi Society of Professional Journalists and the Rotary Club — among others.

So what else is left for Chris Bennett to do?

"To communicate with this community on a daily basis either through the newspaper or to restore a broadcasting facility very much missed and needed in this community."

And if Bennett's prior success is any indication, those dreams, too, will come true.

Meanwhile, Bennett offers this advice to aspiring journalists who wish to remain in the Black community:

"John Russwurm wrote in *Freedom's Journal* in 1827: 'We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us.' That philosophy still prevails today. And if you're not committed to that philosophy, you have no future with the Black Press, or the Black community for that matter."

Bennett has four children, Bernard, 12, Jawann, 6, Khalid, 4, and Malika, 8 months. He resides in South Seattle with his wife, Gloria.

(Editor's note: The Connie Bennett Cameron Mini-Novel Series, a new feature in The Medium, is a biographical sketch of various Seattleites who have contributed to the development of Black folk. Adapted for newspaper, the series is written by national award winning writer, Connie Bennett Cameron, president and managing editor of Tiloum Publishing Company.)