

OPINION

Civil Rights Journal

A New Day—Change Has Taken Place in Birmingham

by Bernice Powell-Jackson

In his new book, *A Way Out of No Way*, remembering the civil rights movement and his participation in it, Andrew Young recalls the Birmingham of old.

He remembers when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) made the decision to concentrate its efforts in that city, all the staff were fearful. He even recalls how Dr. King joked about who was going to give up their life in a Birmingham, even delivering satirical eulogies for each of the staff.

But the Birmingham of today is a different city. It is a city with an African American mayor and a majority-black city council.

Instead of Bull Conner heading the police force, an African American, Johnnie Johnson is today the police chief of an integrated force. Clearly, change has taken place in Birmingham.

Another index of that change has recently taken place around the proposed

opening of a new toxic waste transfer station in the predominately African American area of Titusville in Birmingham.

Several local community organizations, including the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the Titusville Total Awareness Group joined with the Southern Organizing Committee Youth Task Force and carried on an opposition campaign even after the city council had approved a bid to build the transfer station.

On January 15, as a way to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, these community groups sponsored a youth march against the waste transfer station's opening in their community.

The march, which began at the Civil Rights Institute, was to go past city hall and culminate with an anti-violence rap music concert at a housing project.

A few blocks from city hall, the youth were confronted by police officers and violence erupted. Pictures of Birmingham police wielding nightsticks and spraying mace

in the faces of black youth soon appeared in newspapers.

Long-time Birmingham civil rights and religious leaders decried violence, with several recalling that not since the 1960s had they seen something like this happen in that city. But as bad as those pictures looked, they moved the new Birmingham into action.

Richard Arrington, Birmingham's mayor, met immediately with representatives of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement to discuss the incident and explore constructive ways of dealing with the problems arising from the confrontation.

Four days after the incident, the Mayor and community leaders held a press conference to state publicly their commitment to work together and to continue to communicate.

More importantly, the city began to review its decision to allow the waste transfer station to open in Titusville. When the city ruled that the station could not open, its owners filed a \$17

million suit against the city. A settlement has now been reached between the city and the owner of the station.

This is a new day in Birmingham. The waste transfer station will not open in Titusville. The youth completed their march on March 4 and joined other marchers in Selma that weekend to commemorate the 29th anniversary of the Selma-Montgomery march.

This story has important implications for cities all across this nation. Seven years ago the Commission for Racial Justice released its landmark report, *Toxic Wastes and Race*, which showed that race is the most important single factor in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities.

It located hazardous waste sites in both cities and rural areas across the United States. It came out of five previous years of investigation and challenging of the alarming presence of toxic substances in residential areas across the country by the Commission for Racial Justice.

Everyday, new waste stations are opening up in communities large and small. Some of them are toxic way-stations, others are not. Too often the community knows nothing of their presence until decisions have been made and too often local governments and private companies don't talk with local residents about what they are planning.

But citizens do have control of the destiny of their own communities. Birmingham proves that.

Fred Shuttlesworth, who as the local SCLC organizer in Birmingham in the 1960s brought the nation's attention to the plight of black people in Birmingham, said 30 years ago, "As Birmingham goes, so goes the nation." That was true then, and that is true now.

Bernice Powell-Jackson is the executive director for the Commission for Racial Justice in Cleveland, Ohio.

Kitsap County Chronicle

Post Office Box 841
Silverdale, Washington 98383
Phone (206) 692-7595
Fax (206) 792-0919

Editor & Publisher Teresa McDermott

Associate Publisher Ervin McDermott II

Managing Editor Sharlene Harrigan

Editorial Assistant Stacie A. K. Peters

Community Relations William Adams, Loxie Eagans Jr.,
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Photographer Oscar Jones

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Free Inquiry

Faith Healing Claims Challenged

by Norm R. Allen, Jr.

When James Randi helped to prove that alleged faith healer Peter Popoff used secret radio transmissions to discover what ailed various members of his audience, many blacks where attending these religious gatherings.

At one event, an elderly black woman threw away her walker as Popoff proclaimed that she had been healed in the name of Jesus. Popoff was eventually revealed as a flim-flam artist.

In London, large numbers of blacks attend sessions held by the alleged faith healer Morris Cerullo.

In August, former soccer star Pele claimed he has the power to heal sick children through God. Pele said that miracles such as children recovering from cancer have occurred often in Brazil and other countries.

Many blacks say that their sick, elderly grandmothers give large amounts of money to alleged faith healers hoping to be cured of their various ailments. Even when they discover they have been duped, many believers continue to give substantial financial support to these religious leaders. But while some want to be deceived, others do not.

The average life span for blacks is 70.0 years compared to 76.4 years for whites. And the black life span is still

falling. According to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta in 1988, the death rate for the nation's leading cause of death—heart disease—was 3.4 times higher for blacks than whites.

The study also revealed that the infant mortality rate for blacks was almost twice that of whites. Of the 15 leading causes of death in the United States, blacks led whites in 13 categories.

Tuberculosis, a disease that was almost eradicated twenty years ago, is making a comeback among poor Americans. In 1990, TB killed blacks at a rate of 3.4 times greater than that of whites.

Forty percent of patients awaiting organ transplants are black. And the list goes on. As syndicated columnist Tony Brown once remarked, "We lead in categories no one wants to lead in."

There are many reasons why blacks do not live as long as whites—discrimination, poverty, inadequate medical care, lack of health insurance, poor eating habits, etc.

Surely our time and money can be better spent trying to solve these problems, as opposed to increasing the wealth of religious charlatans dedicated to exploiting the black community.

In the Spring 1986 issue of *Free Inquiry*, Paul Kurtz discussed two important scientific studies of faith

healing in his article "Does Faith Healing Work?" According to Kurtz, the studies concluded that: "Although some forms of faith healing may relieve psychosomatic symptoms, there is no clear evidence that faith healing can cure organic illness." But those who believe blindly will not be deterred by the facts.

Why have the black media and black investigative journalists been reluctant to report religious fraud in the black community? Some blacks have opposed many white religionists primarily on the grounds that the latter are racists who exploit blacks and seek to oppress them.

The black media will not hesitate to defend blacks against exploitation in most other areas. Is there a black societal taboo against questioning the alleged powers of religious faith healers?

Or is it that the black media depend very heavily upon the black church and do not want to ruffle feathers? Ironically, even the most outspoken black radicals seem reluctant to question faith healing claims, because they themselves are religious leaders who have made such claims, or because they depend upon religious rhetoric to advance their cause.

Many blacks believe that spirituality has always been and always will be absolutely essential to black progress. But

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Words of Life

The man who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything.

—Edward John Phelps