

Harlem

MOVED BY SOCIAL ACTIVISM

By Ron Scott

Since its reputation as the “Black cultural capital of the world” was established, activism has remained the cornerstone of Harlem. The NAACP became active in Harlem in 1910, under its co-founder W.E.B. Dubois, to secure political, educational, social, and economic equality for African Americans. Today as one of the oldest civil rights organizations in America it undertakes litigation, political activity, and public education programs. Marcus Garvey, a black nationalist brought his Universal Negro Improvement Association to Harlem in 1916, promoting racial pride and black ownership. A. Philip Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP, 1925) that represented black porters and maids who served the white patrons of Pullman sleeping and dining railroad cars. In 1937 the BSCP settled the first contract between a major U.S. company and a black union.

Harlem was originally an independent village of New York City until 1873. After being incorporated into the greater city, a housing boom emerged.



The area was quickly populated with Jews, Italians and other ethnic groups during the 1890s. Following a real estate crash, white landlords were anxiously trying to find whites to rent in Harlem, but yet they were reluctant to rent to blacks. The black real estate entrepreneur Phillip Payton, Jr. moved blacks into the Harlem community in 1904-1905. His Afro-American Realty Company was primarily responsible for the mass migration of blacks from the early Manhattan neighborhoods of the Tenderloin (34th Street), San Juan Hill (the Lincoln Center area), and Hell's Kitchen (the west 40s and 50s).

Due to a segregated society, activism in Harlem was an on-going process with many tentacles. Reverend John H. Johnson of St. Martin's Church took a more subtle role of activism in 1937 by forming the St. Martin's Federal Credit Union, which made it possible for its black congregation to obtain mortgages and acquire real estate. This concept was used by many Harlem churches over the years.

Early on following the “Great Depression” blacks



banned together to change their situation in Harlem by forming the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. Boycotts were organized by the Citizens’ League for Fair Play against Blumstein’s Department Store on 125th Street, in June 1934. The store soon agreed to a more integrated staff. This success empowered Harlem residents to take on other protests with the reverend and civil rights leader Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. As chairman of the Coordinating Committee for Employment, he organized rent strikes and public campaigns, forcing Harlem Hospital to hire black workers. His bus boycott in 1941 led to the hiring of 200 black workers by the transit authority. When Negro pharmacists were failing to get hired, Powell led a fight in 1941 to have drugstores in Harlem hire them all.

In 1937 Powell succeeded his father as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church. In 1941 he was elected to the New York City Council as the city’s first Black council representative. In 1944 Powell was elected as a Democrat to the House of Representatives, representing the 22nd congressional district. He was the first black Congressman from New York. Recently celebrating its 200th anniversary, Abyssinian Baptist Church remains in the forefront of Harlem activism under its 20-year pastor, Dr. Reverend Calvin O. Butts, II.

Many groups were active in Harlem during the turbulent 1960s, fighting for better schools, jobs, and housing. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had offices on 125th street, and acted as negotiator for the community with the city, especially in times of racial unrest. The influence of the Southern Nonviolent Protest movement was quite prevalent in Harlem and Martin Luther King, Jr. appeared on many occasions. The Black Panther Party incorporated breakfast and tutorial programs for school children, patrolled the community, and spoke out against injustice. The Nation of Islam whose Temple Number 7 was run by Malcolm X (1952 -1963) was the most influential in galvanizing self determination in Harlem. Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) coined the phrase “Black power” and was a dynamic member and chairman of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Harlem was a community of activism out of necessity and that same spirit continues to ignite its residents when injustices arise. For three decades Reverend Al Sharpton has been at the forefront of community activism. Even his run for President of the U.S. was a form of activism. This continued social activism and community organization played a major role in Barack Obama being elected the first black President of the U.S.