



NAACP Portland Branch Four Decades of Fighting for Civil Rights in Maine

FOR MAINE and America, the 1960s were years of lightning and days of drums, when conscience called on the best in us to speak out against racism, discrimination, and despair. For over 40 years the Portland NAACP has been Maine's conscience, calling us to the higher fields of fairness and respect for all peoples. In recalling our history we do not set deeds into dusty books; for to commemorate our past is to recommit our cause to the future. Like a line of banners, our story marches on.

Maine was no stranger to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The first known Maine chapter formed in Bangor about 1920, and a "Maine State Chapter" formed in Portland in the late 1940s had sadly disbanded in 1959.

But the pent-up tides for justice rose again in April 1964. Only days after three Maine youths were jailed in Florida for "agitating for desegregation," a multi-faith gathering at Woodfords Congregational Church called for a new NAACP chapter in Portland. On May 11, 1964, over one hundred faithful attended the election of the new branch's multiracial officers: President Gerald E. Talbot, Vice President Nunzi Napolitano, Treasurer Linwood Young, and Secretary Rev. Birger Johnson. Just days before, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on his first and only visit Downeast, had called rallies in Biddeford and Brunswick to action, and with exactly \$182.00 in the bank, the Portland NAACP turned to face the tumultuous 1960s. Few could have known the "sometimes backbreaking, always frustrating" road that lay ahead.

Fair housing, employment, and education were the branch's first challenges. In February 1965, the Portland chapter's controversial Survey of the Negro Community in the City of Portland found "segregation... and outright discrimination" in the city's job and housing market. Agitation followed, and in result the legislature passed Maine's first Fair Housing Act, signed by Gov. John Reed in May 1965, months before similar federal legislation. In 1966, the branch filed Maine's first "Fair Public Accommodation" lawsuit against Donahue's Restaurant on Free Street, for refusing to serve mixed-race couples, and challenged the all-white Portland Police Department's hiring policies. In 1967, the New England Regional NAACP joined Portland in investigating the plight of Maine's "abused and virtually neglected" Passamaquoddy and Penobscot peoples.

Again and again, national tragedies brought Portlanders to the streets. On Sunday, March 14, 1965, over 2,000 braved brisk winds to march down Congress Street to protest the killing of Civil Rights worker Rev. James Reeb in Mississippi. "The color of our skins may be different," Rabbi Morris Bekritsky told the crowd in City Hall Plaza, "But the color of our tears is the same." Grief walked the same route again on Palm Sunday, April 7, 1968, when 400 silently marched to NAACP ceremonies at Portland High School in honor of Dr. King, slain in Memphis. "How do we give meaning to our mourning?" Federal Judge Frank Coffin asked a hushed crowd... "In honesty, purification, and rededication."

In that spirit, symbolic marches were matched with solid action. Many Portland branch members served on Maine's first-ever Governor's Task Force on Human Rights. "To be black in the state of Maine means," read the ringing words of its final report in December 1968, "that you feel almost totally isolated in a basically hostile community, subject to pressure your white neighbors

cannot understand even when, occasionally, they try.” After a rocky political road the result was the pioneering Maine Human Rights Act of 1971, proudly signed by Gov. Kenneth Curtis, surrounded by many members of the Portland NAACP.

Fair housing, voting, and jobs were the themes of the 70s and 80s, as Maine’s new Human Rights Commission set to work. In 1971, Portland NAACP picket lines surrounded the city’s Elks Club to protest their “whites-only” membership policy (which was quickly repealed), and Portland NAACP protests shut down a local showing of the racist film classic “Birth of a Nation.” A Youth Council of the Portland NAACP was formed in 1968, and in 1971 the state experienced the first Miss Black Teen-Age America pageant with Vanessa Howse of Bangor becoming its first crown bearer. In 1972, Gerald E. Talbot became the first black ever elected to the Maine State Legislature—yet he served a city where no blacks worked at store counters, no blacks served in the Fire or Police departments, and no blacks worked at City Hall. And in 1973, Karlene Carter of Bangor became the first African American to address both houses of the Maine legislature.

“Know we’re here. We respect you; please respect us,” said Portland NAACP President Leonard Cummings in 1978, arguing for equal opportunity in bidding by local minority firms seeking Federal contracts. “None of us has made it until all of us do.” True indeed, added branch President Walter Adams in 1983, urging the Portland NAACP to broaden its horizons to include all 3,100 blacks scattered across Maine, among other minorities, many isolated on Maine military bases, “Maine, as far as sensitivity with race issues, is 20 to 30 years behind the times in dealing with people of other nationalities... If we ever believe there is no more progress to be made, we should throw in the towel. We’re just getting started.”

In 1987, Evangeline Berry, a proud working mother of five who had risen above anonymous hate mail received when she first came to Maine, was elected the Portland NAACP’s first woman president, only to face a loud resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in high-unemployment towns around Rumford. Against this outburst of hate the Portland NAACP, with the Maine Council of Churches, organized an inter-faith counter-rally promoting respect and understanding. Take a stand, said Neville Knowles, past founder of several Maine NAACP chapters, “Silence is consent. Silence has made justice complacent. Where shall Maine take its stand?”

By the early 1990s the NAACP was seen, in the cause of racial justice, as the first hope for some and the only hope for many. NAACP chapters in Brunswick, Bangor and Lewiston had closed by the late 1960s and, in the teeth of a national recession, many Mainer’s attention turned to the grind of day-to-day life. But symbolic of the higher and greater cause was the Maine State Prison Chapter of the NAACP, founded and aided by the Portland branch in 1988, and honored by the National NAACP in 1991 as the “Best Program by a New NAACP Branch.” Social justice required service on both sides of the prison bars.

Countless Portland branch conferences behind corporate doors discussed hiring practices and opened symbolic windows. Retail giant L.L. Bean, notified in the 90s by the Portland NAACP that no people of color appeared in any of their catalogues, immediately began to feature minority models, and promptly donated \$100,000 to send children of color to summer camp. Under branch President Moses Sebunya, the Portland NAACP filed complaints in 1996 with the U.S. Department of Labor over the lack of minority hiring in Maine state government, and in 1998 with the U.S. Department of Education over lack of minority staffers and equal opportunity for English as a Second Language students in the Portland School Department.

At the turn of the 21st Century, Maine still had the least diverse population in America, according to the U.S. Census of the year 2000; less than 2% of the state’s 1.2 million people

claimed African American or other minority status. Yet issues of diversity, equal access, and economic justice continued to make the front page in a changing Maine. When Somali refugees, fleeing a war-torn homeland, sought new lives in Lewiston, they were met by a strong letter from its Mayor declaring that his city had enough problems already. In response, the Portland NAACP allied with Portland LULAC (the League of United Latin American Citizens) in October 2002 for a multicultural town meeting at the University of New England, to question Maine's gubernatorial candidates about equality and opportunity in the state they hoped to lead. And, like the Franco Americans who once filled the city before them, today Lewiston's Somali community leads a busy life as, quite literally, Maine's newest "African Americans."

And the challenge continues. In 2004, following a series of well-publicized raids on Portland's public places by armed federal agents, the Portland NAACP packed the Governor's cabinet room in Augusta with a rainbow of human rights activists to demand an end to racial profiling and spot immigration checks for those seeking Maine government services. Shortly thereafter, Gov. John Baldacci proudly signed an Executive Order, making Maine one of the first states to do so.

In Portland, Rachel Talbot Ross serves as the changing city's Director of Multicultural Affairs and Equal Opportunity; Grace Valenzuela serves a similar position in the Portland School Department. In 2001, Winston McGill, a former Portland branch Vice President, became the city's first African American firefighter in almost a century, and the first to serve as both a city policeman and fireman in Portland's history. Two African Americans, Clifford Richardson and Jill Duson, have served on the Portland City Council (Counselor Duson was sworn in as Portland's first African American mayor in December 2004); an Asian American, Tae Chong, representing the city at-large, served on the school committee. And in 2001, the first year of the new century, Neville Knowles, a proud adopted Mainer who for 50 years had helped found or revitalize four Downeast NAACP chapters (Lewiston, Brunswick, Bangor and Portland), was unanimously elected President of the Portland NAACP again. Hailed as "One of the few who has never quit," Knowles symbolically united in one career the Maine NAACP's rich past and proud future.

For the NAACP, the seeds of the new century are well planted. Almost 15% of Portland's school population are young people of color or immigrants enjoying the lessons of school Civil Rights teams from their earliest years. Portland is home to the most densely populated and ethnically diverse square miles in Maine—home to the new generations who, like immigrants before them, shall enrich the state their lives will change. Today, 40 years after their parents and grandparents marched Congress Street to mourn Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a rising generation runs Maine's largest and most diverse city. Across the span of 40 years, two generations—Maine's NAACP pioneers and Maine's future—shake symbolic hands.

Both generations have seen the lightning; both have heard the call. For both, in the words of First Corinthians 15:52, "The trumpet shall sound in the city... and we shall be changed forever."

—*Representative Herb Adams*