



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1982

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In Memory of the Adam Clayton Powell I Knew

He never wanted any more or any less than what the rules or the customs of the situation dictated. He defended his actions by simply saying, "As a member of Congress, I have done nothing more than any other member, and by the grace of God, I intend to do not one bit less." This was the answer he gave when interrogated on a charge of wrong doing by a Congressional Committee.

You know, on reliving some of the incidents which occurred to me in my personal relationship with the late Adam Clayton Powell down through the years during my formative stage as a teenager growing up in Harlem, as a college student and in my later years as a newspaper man covering his exploits, I feel I can honestly say that I think it was this philosophy about life that drove this intent man all during his days on this earth.

I now recall that a lot of us who grew up in Harlem on 133rd Street between Fifth and Lenox, on Lenox Avenue around 135th Street, or 136th Street, or 138th, 139th and 140th Streets did not fully understand that 'High Yallah Negro', who wore those tailored knickers around that big Baptist Church on 138th Street.

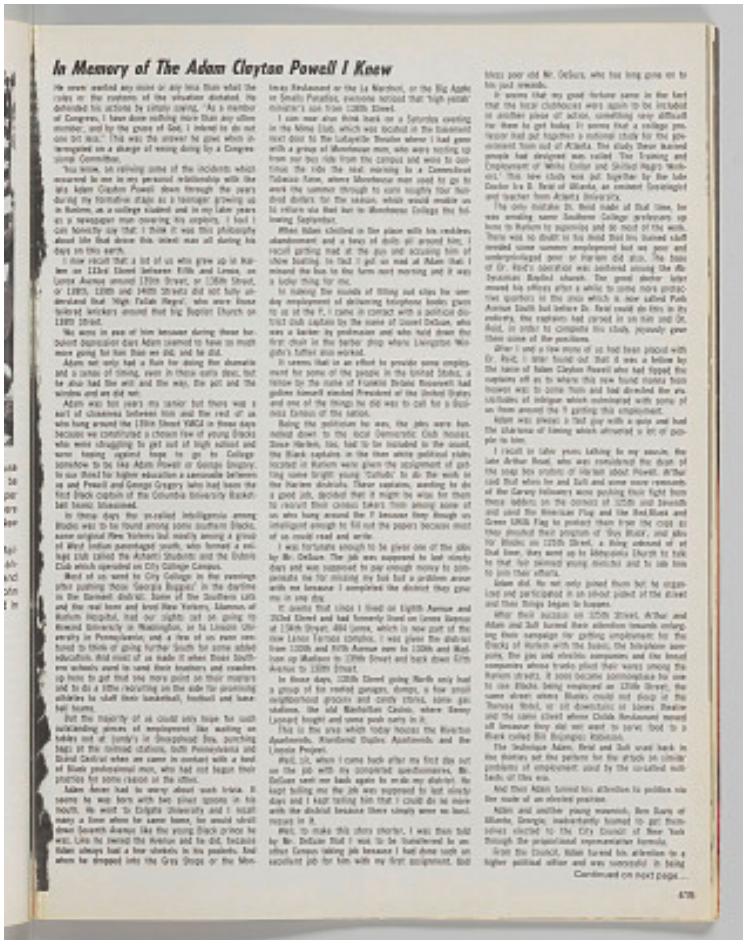
We were in awe of him because during those turbulent depression days Adam seemed to have so much more going for him than we did, and he did.

Adam was ten years my senior but there was a sort of closeness between him and the rest of us who hung out around the 135th Street YMCA in those days because we constituted a chosen few of young Blacks who were struggling to get out of high school and were hoping against hope to go to College somehow to be like Adam Powell or George Gregory. In our thirst for higher education a camaraderie between us and Powell and George Gregory (who had been the first Black captain of the Columbia University Basketball team), blossomed.

In those days the so-called intelligensia among Blacks was to be found among some Southern Blacks, some original New Yorkers but mostly among a group of West Indian parentaged youth, who formed a college club called the Ashanti Students and the Dubois Club which operated on City College Campus.

Most of us went to City College in the evenings after pushing those 'Georgia Buggies' in the daytime in the Garment district. Some of the Southern cats and the real born and bred New Yorkers, Alumnus of Harlem Hospital, had our sights set on going to Howard University in Washington, or to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania; and a few of us even ventured to think of going further South for some added education. And most of us made it when those Southern schools used to send their teachers and coaches up here to get that one more point on their masters and to do a little recruiting on the side for promising athletes to staff their basketball, football and baseball teams.

But the majority of us could only hope for such outstanding pieces of employment like waiting on tables out at Lundy's in Sheephead Bay; punching bags at the railroad stations, both Pennsylvania and Grand Central when we came in contact with a host of Black professional men,



who had not begun their practice for some reason or the other.

Adam never had to worry about such trivia. It seems he was born with two silver spoons in his mouth. He went to Colgate University and I recall many a time when he came home, he would stroll down Seventh Avenue like the young Black prince he was. Like he owned the Avenue and he did, because Adam always had a few shekels in his pockets. And when he dropped into the Grey Shops or the Monteray Restaurant or the La Marcheri, or the Big Apple or Smalls Paradise, everyone noticed that 'high yallah' minister's son from 138th Street.

I can now also think back on a Saturday evening in the Mime Club, which was located in the basement next door to the Lafayette Theater where I had gone with a group of Morehouse men, who were resting up from our bus ride from the campus and were to continue the ride the next morning to a Connecticut Tobacco Farm, where Morehouse men used to go to work for the summer through to earn roughly four hundred dollars for the season, which would enable us to return via that but to Morehouse College the following September.

When Adam strolled in the place with his reckless abandonment and a bevy of dolls all around him, I recall getting mad at the guy and accusing him of show boating. In fact I got so mad at Adam that I missed the bus to the farm next morning and it was a lucky thing for me.

In making the rounds of filling out slips for one-day employment of delivering telephone books given to us at the Y, I came in contact with a political district club captain by the name of Lionel DeSuze, who was a barber by profession and who held down the first chair in the barber shop where Livingston Wingate's father also worked.

It seems that in an effort to provide some employment for some of the people in the United States, a fellow by the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt had gotten himself elected President of the United States and one of the things he did was to call for a Business Census of the nation.

Being the politician he was, the jobs were funnelled down to the local Democratic Club houses. Since Harlem, too, had to be included in the count, the Black captains in the then white political clubs located in Harlem were given the assignment of getting some bright young 'Culluds' to do the work in the Harlem districts. These captains, wanting to do a good job, decided that it might be wise for them to recruit their census takers from among some of us who hung around the Y because they thought us intelligent enough to fill out the papers because most of us could read and write.

I was fortunate enough to be given one of the jobs by Mr. DeSuze. The job was supposed to last ninety days and was supposed to pay enough money to compensate me for missing my bus but a problem arose with me because I completed the district they gave me in one day.

It seems that since I lived on Eighth Avenue and 153rd Street and had formerly lived on Lenox Avenue at 134th Street, 484 Lenox, which is now part of the new Lenox Terrace complex, I was given the district from 130th and Fifth Avenue over to 130th and Madison up Madison to 139th Street and back down Fifth Avenue to 130th Street.

In those days, 135th Street going North only had a group of tin roofed garages, dumps, a few small neighborhood grocery and candy stores, some gas stations, the old Manhattan Casino, where Benny Leonard fought and some push carts in it.

This was the area which today houses the Riverton Apartments, Riverbend Duplex Apartments and the Lincoln Project.

Well, sir, when I came back after my first day out on the job with my completed questionnaires, Mr. DeSuze sent me back again to re-do my district. He kept telling me the job was supposed to last ninety days and I kept telling him that I could do no more with the district because there simply were no businesses in it.

Well, to make this story shorter, I was then told by Mr. DeSuze that I was to be transferred to another Census taking job because I had done such an excellent job for him with my first assignment. God bless poor old Mr. DeSuze, who has long gone on to his just rewards.

It seems that my good fortune came in the fact that the local clubhouses were again to be included in another piece of action, something very difficult for them to get today. It seems that a college professor had put together a national study for the government from out of Atlanta. The study these learned people had designed was called 'The Training and Employment of White Collar and Skilled Negro Workers.' This new study was put together by the late Doctor Ira D. Reid of Atlanta, an eminent Sociologist and teacher from Atlanta University.

The only mistake Dr. Reid made at that time, he was sending some Southern College professors up here to Harlem to supervise and do most of the work. There was no doubt in his mind that his trained staff needed some summer employment but we poor and underprivileged poor or Harlem did also. The base of Dr. Reid's operation was centered around the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The good doctor later moved his offices after a while to some more protective quarters in the area which is now called Park Avenue South but before Dr. Reid could do this in its entirety, the captains had zeroed in on him and Dr. Reid, in order to complete his study, joyously gave them some of the positions.

After I and a few more of us had been placed with Dr. Reid, I later found out that it was a fellow by the name of Adam Clayton Powell who had tipped the captains off as to where this new found manna from heaven was to come from and had directed the vicissitudes of intrigue which culminated with some of us from around the Y getting this employment.

Adam was always a fast guy with a quip and had the charisma of timing which attracted a lot of people to him.

I recall in later years talking to my cousin, the late Arthur Read, who was considered the dean of the soap box orators of Harlem about Powell. Arthur said that when he and Sufi and some more remnants of the Garvey followers were pushing their fight from those ladders on the corners of 125th and Seventh and used the American Flag and the Red, Black and Green UNIA Flag to protect them from the cops as they shouted their program of 'Buy Black', and jobs for Blacks on 125th Street, a thing unheard of at that time, they went up to Abyssinia Church to talk to that fair skinned young minister and to ask him to join

their efforts.

Adam did. He not only joined them but he organized and participated in an all-out picket of the street and then things began to happen.

After their successes on 125th Street, Arthur and Adam and Sufi turned their attention towards enlarging their campaign for getting employment for the Blacks of Harlem with the buses, the telephone company, the gas and electric companies and the bread companies whose trucks plied their wares among the Harlem streets. It soon became commonplace for one to see Blacks being employed on 125th Street, the same street where Blacks could not sleep in the Theresa Hotel, or sit downstairs in Loews theatre and the same street where Childs Restaurant moved off because they did not want to serve food to a Black called Bill Bojangles Robinson.

The technique Adam, Reid and Sufi used back in the thirties set the pattern for the attack on similar problems of employment used by the so-called militants of this era.

And then Adam turned his attention to politics via the route of an elected position.

Adam and another young maverick, Ben Davis of Atlanta, Georgia, inadvertently teamed to get themselves elected to the City Council of New York through the proportional representative formula.

From the Council, Adam turned his attention to a higher political office and was successful in being

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