

Timuel D. Black, Bronzeville's Venerable Historian
By Clarice Davis Durham

The Hyde Park Historical Society could not have chosen a better person than Timuel D. Black to lead its upcoming tour of Bronzeville. He is a product of Bronzeville where he attended elementary and high school—absorbing its rich culture and history.

Tim Black was influenced early on by the Washington Park Forum orators, Bronzeville's radical philosophers like Claude Lightfoot and Ismael Flory, who held their sessions in the park across the street from Burke Elementary School where he was a student. Their speeches made sense to him. It was during the time of the Great Depression and they spoke against gouging landlords and discrimination. They made demands for jobs and decent living conditions. And they called on workers to unite and stand up for their rights. They not only made speeches, they also took action when situations called for it—often putting people back into the homes from which they had been evicted because the rent was past due. Tim remembers his excitement and eagerness to join them. He learned a lifelong lesson about backing up convictions with organized action.

Tim spent his high school years in the nurturing and stimulating environment of Bronzeville's Wendell Phillips and DuSable High Schools. He learned from highly qualified teachers who respected him and encouraged him to go as far in life as his talents would take him. George Dorsey, Avery French, Mary Herrick, and Mildred Bryant Jones are among those he remembers. They were the models for his career as an educator.

As a high school student he was interested in sports and was a member of the basketball and baseball teams. After graduation he held a variety of jobs in the community while he tried to make up his mind about his future. His job as an underpaid store clerk provided his first experience with labor union organizing. He met J. Levert Kelly, President of the Waiters and Bartenders Union. Kelly helped Tim and his co-workers form a local chapter of the Retail Clerks Union. They negotiated with their employers and won better pay and working conditions.

World War II interrupted any plans he may have had to continue his education-- and changed his outlook on life. He was profoundly affected by the discrimination he experienced in the army and the human devastation he witnessed in the Buchenwald death camp. He resolved then to dedicate his life to work for peace and justice in the world. He may have remembered too, the speeches he heard long ago as a child. One of his proudest achievements is the work he did in the Progressive Party that helped bring an end to discrimination in the Armed Services.

After his discharge from the Army, he resumed his education. Studies at Roosevelt University (BA) and the University of Chicago (MA) prepared him for his career as an educator. He taught history and social studies at several of Chicago's public high schools, including DuSable, his alma mater and Hyde Park. And like his models, he went beyond curriculum requirements to encourage and inspire his students. He sponsored African American History Clubs and gained their respect and admiration. He considers his impact on young people another of his proudest achievements.

As Assistant Coordinator of the National Teacher Corps, he was responsible for the recruitment and training of teachers who would work in neighborhood schools most in need of well-qualified teachers. He fought discrimination in the Chicago schools and joined with other teachers to form

the Teachers Committee for Quality Education to ensure that a good school would be accessible to every child.

Tim Black served as Dean at Wright Junior College, Vice-President of Olive Harvey City College and Director of Community Affairs of the City Colleges of Chicago. His work to end discrimination in that system may have caused him to lose his budget, thus his position. He returned to the classroom as Professor of Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, and History at Loop (now Harold Washington) City College.

A man concerned about discrimination wherever it exists, Tim, along with James Farmer, National President, organized and served as president of the Chicago chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). He became president of the local chapter of the Negro American Labor Council founded by A. Phillip Randolph, National President. It was through this association that Tim was chosen to organize the Chicago contingent for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Largely as a result of his work, two "Freedom Trains" left Chicago with 3,000 passengers headed for that historic event

Tim also is a political activist. He worked in the campaign to elect Harold Washington the first Black mayor of Chicago. Prior to that he was actively engaged in recruiting and working to elect Richard Hatcher as the first Black mayor of Gary, Indiana. He made an unsuccessful run for alderman against the incumbent Claude Holman, one of the "silent six" Black aldermen in the Chicago City Council during the administration of Richard J. Daley.

True to his commitment to the Bronzeville community and his understanding that a community's history and culture are preserved by its people and institutions, he works actively with the New Phillips/DuSable 35-39ers and the Mary Herrick Scholarship Fund. Both organizations award scholarships to outstanding graduating seniors of DuSable High School. He is Vice President of the DuSable Alumni Coalition that has gotten a commitment from the Chicago Board of Education to upgrade the school by reorganizing it into a Small Schools format beginning in the Fall of 2003. And he recently worked with a coalition in their successful effort to save the historic Metropolitan Community Church, where prominent African American leaders have appeared and organized and spoken.

Tim serves on the boards of several civil rights organizations, including the Justice Coalition of Greater Chicago and the Chicago Committee to Defend the Bill of Rights. He also is a member of the Peace Action Committee, an organization that opposed the war in Iraq.

He is a jazz aficionado with a special admiration for Duke Ellington. He is a much sought after lecturer and recipient of many awards.

Once asked why he didn't write a book to chronicle his vast experiences, his response was "I'm still too busy living them." Thankfully he did find the time. His book, Bridges to Memory, has just been published by North Western University Press.

People who go on the Hyde Park Historical Society tour not only will learn the history and see important places in Bronzeville, but will hear about them from one of its most important sons

Tim Black lives in Hyde Park with his wife, Zenobia Johnson Black. He has a daughter from a previous marriage, Ermetra Black-Thomas.

[This article is one of a series being presented monthly through collaboration of the Herald with the Hyde Park Historical Society. Clarice Durham is a long time activist in Chicago's African American community and a friend of Tim Black since high school. The Hyde Park Historical Society maintains a museum and library at 5529 S. Lake Park. It is open on Saturdays and Sundays from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. For more information call 773/493-1893]