

givingback

Philanthropy: The Heart of Black History

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In 1787 — one month before the first session of the U.S. Constitutional Convention and two years before the election of America's first president — eight men including AME Church founder Richard Allen and Abolitionist Absalom Jones organized the Free Africa Society, a mutual self-help group which became the beginnings of the independent black church and the first steps towards organized black philanthropy in America.

In the next century, the Abolition Movement and the Underground Railroad included many black people who provided assistance in bringing slaves to freedom. Post slavery, the Black church and fraternal and mutual aid associations spent a significant amount of time raising funds for Black philanthropic projects. According to *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* by Leone Bennett, Jr., organizations like these collected \$168 million from blacks between 1870 and 1920. During this period Black churches from virtually all denominations began to establish institutions of higher learning, and historically black colleges re-



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main important vehicles for empowerment and growth of our people.

The early 20th Century brought forth activity that established organizations like the NAACP, the Urban League and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an international self-help organization founded by Marcus Garvey who aggressively pressed the concept, stating: "Chance has never yet satisfied the hope of a suffering people. Action, self-reliance, the vision of self and the future have been the only means by which the oppressed have seen and realized the light of their own freedom."

Subsequent decades saw programs organized and maintained by the black church raising funds and resources that benefited local communities. Churches also reached out to brothers and sisters in Africa offering aid to various counties to assist in alleviating poverty.

The Black philanthropy movement entered the modern era in the late 60's and early 70s. A time of racial unrest in cities across the nation, the concept of self-help faded for many individuals, replaced by a dependence on people outside the black community for our support. In 1967, The United Negro Fund, founded by Rev. Lucius

Walker and in 1968, The Brotherhood Crusade, founded by activist Walter Bremond, provided a jump-start to the concept. Organized in Milwaukee and Los Angeles, the principal

mission of these seminal institutions was to raise funds and resources from within the community, and distribute those funds back into the community from which they came. In 1972 a group of progressive black ministers led by Rev. Walker incorporated The National Black United Fund (NBUF) and Bremond was hired to organize NBUF which he headed until his death in 1982.

As the fourth and current president of NBUF, I have been proud to be a part of a vibrant, forward thinking leadership with offices in 17 cities. After a two year campaign, the Community Change Action Fund of NBUF and its affiliates in GA, IL, MI, NY and NJ, raised \$350,000 to be distributed to community based organizations. As a participating affiliate, Black United Fund of New Jersey raised nearly \$60,000, which is being distributed to 16 non-profits throughout the state of NJ who offer programs addressing youth development in the areas of education, economic self sufficiency, health-care and strengthening families.

The spirit, capacity and willingness of black people to give their time and resources in order to build their communities and support their own institutions is a part of the fabric of our culture. Organizations like the National Black United Fund are directly linked to historical efforts where African-Americans banded together to provide effective assistance in creating and sustaining cultural, economic and social programs.

Much of this history may be new for some, because our history has been left out of

school text books. But it is a glorious history and Americans in general and Black Americans in particular should be aware and proud of the efforts we have achieved on our own.

In the coming months the history of Black Philanthropy will write a new chapter in the wake of the recent devastating earthquake in Haiti. These citizens of the first post colonial, independent, black-led nation in the world have continued to stand strong in the face of unthinkable adversity. The NBUF Haitian Relief Fund has been established with a commitment to continued support long after the worldwide news cameras have left the country.

I am often bewildered when I continue to be asked whether we still need the term "Black" in our name. Through our name and motto, "The Helping Hand That Is Your Own", we embrace our blackness and the self-determination that has been a grounding principal in our community — and the testament of faith at the heart of our history.

The National Black United Fund is a public philanthropic institution founded in 1972. Its mission is to create support and sustain social, economic, cultural and educational institutions through the enhancement of Black philanthropy at the local level. For more information about how you can give back to your community, call 973-643-5122 or visit www.nbuf.org