

ELDERS' WISDOM

IN A FOUNDATIONS-SUPPORTED MULTI-MEDIA PROJECT, PHOTOJOURNALIST CURTIS REAVES CAPTURES THE FACES AND VOICES OF OLDER, BLACK WESTERN PENNSYLVANIANS WHOSE STORIES OTHERWISE WOULD BE LOST. BY CARMEN J. LEE AND BARRY ALFONSO. IMAGES COURTESY OF CURTIS REAVES



Curtis Reaves knew it when he heard it — gold. As he videotaped his mother’s then–85-year-old first cousin recounting family lore, Reaves realized he had tapped a rich mine. He knew the interview was worth far more than its intended use as the centerpiece for a family reunion celebration.

During their conversation in 1991, Reaves’ relative, Anirl Morton, told him about his great-grandparents, John and Sarah Jordan, who had been slaves in North Carolina. Morton described John’s anguish when his mother and sister were sold to a slave owner in Mississippi. She explained how

Sarah, an herbalist and a midwife, frequently was sought out to heal people of their



ailments as well as to deliver babies — black and white.

“She was overturning a lost history in her mind,” Reaves says. “From that I saw the importance of ‘eldership,’ the treasures of the history of the elders.”

After he finished the video for the family reunion, the Duquesne-based photojournalist expanded it and made a digital film that became “John & Sarah: A Family’s Journey to Freedom.” The highly praised documentary and exhibit, completed in 1998, traced his family’s experiences back to his great-grandparents’ living through slavery and learning to move past it.

But Reaves knew he wasn't finished. There were more stories to tell about African-American life through the last century, stories beyond those in his family tree.

"Once this generation dies, that's it," he says. "There'll be a real hole left. That's why it's so important to take full advantage of their particular history... What I'm seeing is a lot of people get to a certain age in their lives and they just want to get their story out. Being able to take all these stories and make them into one story—that's the mission."

With foundation support that includes The Heinz Endowments' Small Arts Initiative, The Pittsburgh Foundation's Multicultural Arts Initiative, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, Reaves' mission has evolved into "Elders: An African American Oral History." The multi-media creation will include a video documentary, story quilts, publications and educational materials. Part of his vision is to have the film shown on monitors set up to look like panels within the quilts as they hang on display.

Once this generation of people dies,

At the heart of the project are the stories of black people, primarily from western Pennsylvania, who share their struggles and triumphs in living through the Depression, two World Wars and the civil rights movement. The goal is a permanent archive of these conversations, where future generations can learn about what the elders experienced.

"If they aren't captured soon, these stories will be lost forever," says Kerry Spindler, a former officer in the Endowments' Arts & Culture Program, which helped support the Elders project. "But they are too important to the memory of the community for us to allow that to happen. Ultimately, the struggles, triumphs and failures of individuals make communities and nations what they are. Curtis' goal is to capture pockets of stories from a time when the public consciousness was in a period of significant change."

So far, Reaves has raised \$119,000 from private donors and the various foundations and nonprofit groups. To complete his project, which already has amassed 60 hours of interviews with some 40 elders, Reaves wants to do another 10 interviews. For that and other work required to turn the material into a one-hour documentary, he will need another \$150,000.

In addition to providing \$14,000 in funding, the Endowments' Small Arts Initiative panel has given Reaves project-management advice and helped him find additional revenue sources. Spindler says Reaves' ambitious project is just the type that the initiative — begun in 1994 — is supposed to support: community-based, well-defined and fueled by passionately dedicated people.

Also, Reaves' track record with the "John & Sarah" project proves, says Spindler, "that he has a unique talent for compiling a web of personal stories and perspectives to create a larger narrative."

Reaves says talking with elders in his family and throughout the region for the larger project revealed gems of wisdom sprinkled in a valuable historical narrative. Some of these elder voices are amplified on the following pages, and they articulate memories of a rich western Pennsylvania history for African Americans. But they also



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Curtis Reaves
photojournalist and videographer

highlight how slowly the wheels of justice turned — even in the eastern part of this country — in rectifying profound racial inequality.

There is the 80-something church musician who talks about the pressure she felt being one of only two black students in the music school of what is now Carnegie Mellon University in the 1940s. There is the retired gospel singer who remembers being among the black students in her predominantly white high school "fighting their way in and out of every day." There is the civil rights–crusading Pittsburgh attorney who, as a child, never knew that his proper place was supposed to be in the back of the bus, since his parents vowed to drive him or he wouldn't go.

In words and in facial expressions cleanly captured by digital technology, the elders strip away the makeup we all apply to the harsher features of our personal and collective histories. But they do not shine a spotlight only on the blemishes. These are the voices of those who have lived long enough and traveled far enough to know the value of casting a broader light. The legacy they provide and that Reaves brings to us in his work is essential to the future well-being of any community: an honest history.



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Byrd Brown’s parents never allowed him to think he wasn’t good enough. They didn’t let him get pushed to the back of the bus. His family drove him where he needed to be or he didn’t go.

“Racism has been a cancer that is eating us up, and we have to understand how to heal ourselves,” said the lawyer and activist before his death in 2001. “Rightness is important. The civil rights movement was not propelled by a bunch of black people who all of a sudden got self-conscious. ...It was a group of people who believed in something right — and it’s still right.”

Brown’s activism started early. While still a youth, he was asked to attempt to integrate groups for young people. He became the first black camper at a local YMCA because he had light skin, but Y officials wouldn’t promote him to counselor with his peers because he was black.

His first local demonstration was at Duquesne Light Co., when only 33 of the 1,000 employees were black — and 32 were janitors and one was a receptionist. He sent fliers to nearly 90 organizations, and thousands of people showed up.

As head of the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Brown helped organize other protests seeking fairer treatment of African Americans at companies such as Sears, Kaufmann’s, Equitable Gas and Mine Safety Appliances.

One of his most vivid memories was listening to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington. A train had to be chartered for the overwhelmingly large number of Pittsburghers who wanted to go.

“It was about 90 or 95 degrees, and there was no such thing as a Port-a-John invented. The trees were about as skinny as my arm and didn’t offer any shade,” Brown recalled. “Everybody’s leaving, and then Martin gets up and starts the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. We all turned around and crowded back in. By the time he finished, I was crying like a baby.”

Byrd

Grace

For decades, Grace Hurt, known to many as “Aunt Sissy,” has been a person folks go to for help and advice.

The retired gospel singer has long been active in community groups in her Beltzhoover neighborhood and used to have a reputation for confronting drug dealers on street corners. Several generations of family and friends have relied on her strength during tough times. But when Hurt thinks of strength, she remembers her mother’s fortitude.

“I can see my mother when she worked at the William Penn Hotel,” she says with a catch in her voice. “The things she had to go through to make a living... She had to do the dirtiest laundry and get called ‘nigger.’ She didn’t get paid that much money, but she wouldn’t quit, because she wasn’t a quitter.”

Hurt faced similar racism while attending the now-closed South Hills High School. The nearly 100 black students “had to fight their way in and out” of the predominantly white school, she recalls. Hurt describes herself as a rebel who frequently got into trouble because she wouldn’t allow anyone to dictate what she could and couldn’t do.

“You had to be tough,” she says. “Teachers were prejudiced, so you had to work extra hard.”

Hurt believes that many older African Americans in Pittsburgh during the 1960s weren’t ready to take a public stand against discrimination — but she was. She went to rallies in the city and once participated in a march with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Throughout her life, Hurt has sung gospel music and maintained close family ties, often with the two intertwined. She and relatives performed with other family singing groups in the city. As an adult, she also opened up her home to children who needed someone to care for them. A mother of five, she’s had several foster children during the past 20 years.

“My family, my kids, my foster kids are my life,” she says.

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Growing up in the Hill District in the 1930s and ’40s, nobody talked to Ralph Hill about going to college. But that didn’t stop him from feeling proud when people saw him carrying schoolbooks home.

“When I was in junior high, I’d walk over to the University of Pittsburgh and sit. At the time, you had to look hard to see a black person there,” recalls Hill, 70. “But I swore I would go to that school someday. Nobody thought I would do that. Praise be to God, he worked it out for me.”

The accomplished pianist and music educator earned a doctorate from Pitt, a master’s from Carnegie Mellon University and a bachelor’s from Norfolk State University. He taught in the Pittsburgh Public Schools and at LaRoche College and is pastor of Greater Emmanuel AME Zionist Church in Aliquippa. But attaining professional success was a challenge.

His father supported his family by collecting paper for recycling, and his mother became a hairdresser, working long hours to supplement the family income. In elementary school, Hill enjoyed singing Stephen Foster songs but was often beaten up by schoolmates because he liked music. He sometimes cleaned houses to raise money for piano lessons, which cost 25 cents each.

Hill also succumbed to peer pressure and began hanging with “a bad group,” playing hooky and smoking. He was kicked out of junior high and high school. Feeling like an outcast, he lied about his age and joined the Army at 16, only to be thrown out of the military, too, when officials learned his age.

He was sent to live with an aunt in Manassas, Va., and, attended a black boarding school housed in a dilapidated building. “But,” Hill says, “that was the first time... that people cared about me — the first time. And this is where God really began his work in me. He planted a seed in me then that I would never lose and would continue to grow.”

Ralph

Peggy

Peggy Pierce Freeman says that music was “born” in her. Her mother was a church pianist; her sister was a vocalist; and the family discovered Freeman’s interest in music when she was about 4.

“I was around music all the time. My father wasn’t a trained musician, but...you came up Conemaugh Street, and the player piano was going,” says Freeman, who grew up in Pittsburgh’s Brushton and Homewood neighborhoods. “You could hear it when you hit the street, ’cause my father liked music... . Everyone in this family loves music.”

Now 82 with 55 years experience as a musician, Freeman still remembers paying for piano lessons in grade school by earning 75 cents a week to escort a younger girl, who was being bullied, to school.

When Freeman was 9, she began taking piano lessons from Mary Cardwell Dawson, founder of the National Negro Opera Company and her mentor. She also listened as another Dawson student took lessons — Freddy Jones, who would later be known as renowned jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal.

Dawson urged Freeman to study music at Carnegie Institute of Technology, now Carnegie Mellon University. With a scholarship from a benefactor she declines to name, Freeman became one of only two black students in the day program at Carnegie Tech’s music school.

Although she didn’t graduate from Carnegie Tech, what Freeman learned further enriched her musical background. She has worked as an organist at several churches, as an accompanist for choirs and as a piano teacher in her home. For 33 years, she was an accompanist at the Pittsburgh Public Schools’ Center for Musically Talented Students.

Always the pioneer, Freeman was one of the few African Americans in the 1960s invited to join the American Guild of Organists. She was the first black female member and first African-American female life member of the Pittsburgh Piano Teachers Association.

“I pride myself in these memberships because it’s history,” says Freeman. “They’ll never be able to get me off the books.”

The Elders’ and African American Oral History project’s next steps

To generate momentum for his Elders project, Curtis Reaves plans to showcase excerpts of interviews before release of the full exhibit, scheduled for completion in 2007. He has an agreement with UPN Channel 19 to provide 30-second interview segments for broadcast in February as part of a “Wisdom Moments” public service series. He also is arranging to show an abbreviated version of the documentary in at least two locations in Pittsburgh that month.

“I’m ramping things up for the big exhibit so that when it hits, there’s a buzz in the community,” Reaves says.

Reaves has a letter from staff at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center expressing interest in displaying the completed project in 2007. He also is in negotiations for an exhibition at the African American Cultural Center, which is scheduled to open in downtown Pittsburgh in 2007. h

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