

The Shriners A Legacy of Leadership

*I watched them tearing a building down,
A gang of men in a busy town,
With a he-heave-ho and a lusty yell,
They swung a beam and the side wall fell.*

*I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled?
And the men you'd hire if you had to build?"*

*He gave a laugh and said, "No indeed,
Just common labor is all I need,
I can easily wreck in a day or two;
What builders have taken a year to do."*

*And I thought to myself, as I went my way,
Which of these roles have I tried to play?
Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by the plumb and square?*

*Or am I a wrecker, who walks to town,
Content with the labor of tearing down?*

The title of this thought-provoking poem by J.W. Barnes, a Prince Hall Mason Past Grand Master, is "Be a Builder, Yes, a Master Builder."

It is most fitting that a profile of the Prince Hall Shriners should begin with poetry about a Master Builder because that is what these men truly are. "Prince Hall Shriners are distinguished by a penchant for fun in the interest of philanthropy," said Bossie Benjamin Simons, Past Publicity Director. "Their philosophy," he continued, "is pleasure without intemperance, hospitality without rudeness, and being jolly without coarseness."

For all their zest for living the good life, Prince Hall Shriners are a serious and important fraternal order. Their history is steeped in solid citizenship. The affluence of some of its members has but served to increase their sense of responsibility to their race. They sincerely believe that the *raison d'être* of an organization like theirs is community building of the highest order. They are constrained to make definite contributions to the welfare of the Black community through charity, participation in civic affairs and by assisting in its economic development.



Imperial Potentate Earl H. Gray

Builders of AOIP

Probably in no place has the seriousness of this order been more evident than in the enthusiastic and consistent support—financial and otherwise—that the Shriners have given to the development of the national Assault On Illiteracy Program (AOIP). Right from the very beginning of the development of the AOIP "affective-oriented" concept of building pride in our people and in our communities as a complementary approach to the proven-to-be-limited "cognitive-oriented" approach

of an overwhelming number of our classroom teachers, the Shriners were supportive.

According to past Imperial Potentate Harry Smith, "we have long been supporters of the United Negro College Fund and many other essential and much more 'traditional' endeavors which favored support for those ten to fifteen percent known to be gifted. However, when we first were made aware of this effort to reach out to that other eighty-five to ninety percent that needed and often deserved much, much more help than anyone else, we knew that we had to be counted among the initiators of this new and long-overdue focus."

Those sentiments were echoed by another past Imperial Potentate—Roswell Taylor, who immediately followed Smith as world-wide head of the Shriners. According to Imperial Potentate Taylor, "I was at the side of my predecessor when the alarming statistics about the rate of illiteracy among Black adults being almost three times as high as the 16 percent estimate among White adults was reported.

"It was at this meeting that all of us began to realize that, while it surely was much easier and far more glamorous to be supportive of the college-bound, the task of focusing simultaneously on the enormous and unaddressed task of that seemingly-forgotten group being highlighted by AOIP was one to which the Shriners must give even more priority support. And, beginning then, we have been deeply involved in all aspects of AOIP.

"Quite importantly, we believe, we informed to presenters of AOIP that no new worthwhile endeavor ever would be easy. It was not for us and it wouldn't be for them. However, no matter how rocky the road, our commitment was to be right there with them."

Out of the Past

In the archives of the Mystic Shrine Imperial Council, there is a copy of the transactions of the Imperial Grand Council of Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine held in Buffalo, New York on Friday, August 1, 1901. This jealously guarded old document is the only historical record of the early Imperial Council sessions...and it was the first to show that this new road ahead for them was as rocky as it surely would be, at times, for AOIP.

(Next Page) ►

"Pulling Ourselves Up By Our Own Bootstraps"...A Series