

BUSINESS

NNPA, Black leaders discuss areas of cooperation

Special to Sentinel-Voice

During their Washington celebrations commemorating 171 years of the Black Press, leaders of the National Newspaper Publishers Association met with African-American officials to discuss areas of cooperation.

Among those addressing the NNPA board was John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association, who asked for the support of the Black Press in the farmers' fight against the U.S. government's discriminatory practices.

Boyd and other representatives of Black farmers took their fight for economic justice to the United Nations, delivering a petition to the body, March 18.

The document requests that U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan investigate widespread

violations of their human rights.

"The country has enabled the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) to continue to discriminate against its customers," Boyd said. "This is a national crisis. They have stolen our land. They have taken away our livelihood. Now they are trying to take away our heritage."

African-American farmers have lost more than one million acres of land in the past half century, and the erosion hasn't ended.

There are myriad reasons for this dramatic decline, but most point to racism and say the biggest racists are the U.S. government and the Department of Agriculture (DOA).

A federal judge has set Feb. 1, 1999, as the trial date in the case, but says he hopes a mediation process will settle the issue before then.



Black farmers met with NNPA to discuss their fight against the U.S. government. From left, Lawrence Lucas, president, Coalition of Minority Employees at the U.S. Department of Agriculture; NNPA Secretary Jane Woods-Miller; Carole Geary, former board member; Dorothy R. Leavell, president; board member Edward Smith and John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association. Photo Special to Sentinel-Voice by Roy Lewis

DOWN TO BUSINESS

Black manufacturers continuing to make an impact

*By John William Templeton
Special to Sentinel-Voice*

Many uninformed people like to say "Black people are just consumers, they don't make anything."

That's not true; it never has been.

But when young people hear it often enough, they don't put manufacturing or engineering at the top of their career list.

So a young Black male student from San Jose State University studying for an engineering degree in mechatronics was very happy to have the opportunity to meet Roy E. Clay Sr., the "godfather" of Black Silicon Valley and one of the obstetricians that delivered the computer age.

Clay spoke as a Sunnyvale-based company, Envirotech Inc., headed by Chester Davenport, topped the American Stock Exchange because of its announcement of a remote sensor system for detecting automotive emissions to be test-marketed by the City of New York.

Envirotech (ENR:AMEX), a Black-controlled public company, is the leader in providing automotive emissions testing for states and localities. Another Black innovator in Houston, Meredith Gourdine, holds patents for devices to measure pollution.

Clay's products touch every American household and many more around the world. Every consumer electronic product sold in the United States is tested for electrical shorts on one of the hi pot (dielectric withstand) testers that his 20-year-old company, Rod-L Electronics of Menlo Park, makes.

Rod-L's products are the only ones certified by the Underwriters Laboratory. Ironically, in 1951, Clay was told by McDonnell Aircraft

that "we have no jobs for professional Negroes" after receiving his mathematics degree from St. Louis University. Five years later he returned to become the programmer for McDonnell's first computer. By 1961, he was helping to write languages like Basic, Fortran and Cobol for Control Data.

In 1965, David Packard and William Hewlett recruited Clay to begin the computer operation for Hewlett-Packard Co., in Palo Alto, Calif. The former Stanford students with the soon-to-be-famous names shunned the engineering talent at their alma mater.

"I was the first employee of the computer operation and it literally grew under me," recalled Clay during the first of the Chat with Black Innovators series at the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose.

His direct supervisor was Tom Perkins.

"Tom went on to be the real founder of the venture capital industry, and without venture capital there would have been no personal computers because the large companies would not have taken the risk."

Clay had a personal example. "The Holiday Inn came to us and wanted a point-of-sale system, but they said, 'It can't fail,' so we built the first 'fault-tolerant' computer and were about to ship it to them, but Bill Hewlett called and said, 'Cancel the order, we don't want to be in that business.'"

After Perkins left Hewlett-Packard, he founded Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers, the venture capital firm that funded 40 percent of the companies that have emerged in Silicon Valley. Clay left six months later when passed over to take Perkins' job on a permanent basis.

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"My wife told me that if you work as hard for yourself as you have for other people, you'll be successful in anything you do."

— Roy E. Clay Sr.

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Clay advised Perkins to put money into a new company to make the 'fault-tolerant' computers, now the backbone of banks, retailers, stock exchanges and other 24-hour applications. That company was Tandem Computers. He also consulted with Robert Noyce, the co-inventor of the transistor, who was trying to form a company called Intel.

"There were so many things you could use these chips in that I suggested, 'Don't try to make anything with them, just sell the chips.'"

And when a former Texas Instruments engineer came calling for a new company to make personal computers, Clay also "green lighted" Compaq for venture funding.

The savvy technologist also saw an opportunity for himself. Texas Instruments had dropped its personal computers after a highly publicized series of fires caused by electrical shorts. The fledgling industry was in jeopardy of collapse. Clay devised a way to conduct the dielectric withstand tests on the production line, rather than at the design stage, to insure that every machine was safe.

In the 20 years since, he has maintained his status as the only company certified by the Underwriters Laboratory. "One of the barriers that is often said about us is that the quality is less. I've always been confident that my product was superior to any."

"Then people have said, 'You're an exception.' So I've continued to bring people to

the table who haven't had the opportunities.

"My manufacturing manager is a young woman from East Palo Alto who is a high school graduate but I was

very impressed with her work, so I asked her to be a line supervisor," he recalled. "She was unsure, but she said, 'If you think I can do it, I'll try.' She did very well at that job so I asked her to be the manufacturing manager. Once again she was unsure but gave it a shot. I know that she would never have gotten that opportunity, but she is an indication of all the people out there who can have success if they get the chance."

Clay and 40 other innovators from the Silicon Valley Renaissance and the Emancipation Wave are featured in the exhibition Turning the Century: African-American Innovators in the New Millennium and the Dawn of the Industrial Age at the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose through June 5.

John William Templeton is executive editor of "Griot," the African-American, African and Caribbean business daily.

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