

COMMENTARY

Heroes big and small deserve our admiration, thanks

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Film buffs and many of us who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s will recall Dane Clark, the actor who made his mark playing soldiers, sailors and pilots in a slew of films about World War II. Mr. Clark's characters were tough guys, but ones with hearts of gold.

Who knew he had one in real life, too?

I noticed Dane Clark's obituary in the newspapers in September, and was mildly surprised to read that he, who so believably projected a hard-as-nails-guy-from-the-streets image on the screen was not only an Ivy league grad (Cornell University), but a law school alumnus (St. John's University Law School) as well.

But what really surprised me was that Clark was said to be "especially proud" of the 1954 film, "Go, Man, Go!," in which he played Abe Saperstein, the founder of the Harlem Globetrotters, the path-breaking black basketball team.

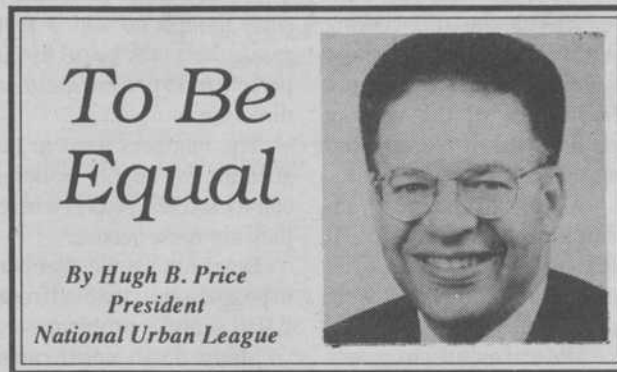
The obituary in the *New York Times* said that Clark "regarded the film as a

forerunner of others that decried racial discrimination and championed civil rights."

That this film star would so value his participation in a film that made a statement against racial discrimination — made during a time when such public statements were all too rare in any sector of American society — set me to thinking, and to take notice in subsequent weeks of the deaths of a remarkable collection of individuals.

Some of those who died were famous and had lived much or crucial parts of their lives in the public spotlight: among them, the scholar, John Henrik Clarke; Tom Bradley, the former Mayor of Los Angeles; Charles C. Diggs, Jr., the former Congressman from Detroit; Dorothy West, the novelist; Kwame Toure (Stokeley Carmichael), the activist; and Henry Hampton, the documentary filmmaker and producer of "Eyes on the Prize."

Others, including several from within our National Urban League family, were unknown to the larger world. They included Frederick D.



Wilkinson Jr., a New York City business executive who was a longtime trustee and national treasurer of the Urban League; and Perry H. Young Jr., the first African-American pilot to fly for a commercial air line in the United States.

But what they all had in common was their commitment to advance the cause of civil rights.

Some, no doubt, did not see themselves as "civil rights activists."

They just wanted to live their lives unfettered by arbitrary limits and help others do the same.

Our own "Buddy" Wilkinson, a graduate of Howard University and Harvard Business School,



was recruited to the prestigious executive training program of Macy's department store in the late 1940s.

That was the beginning of a career of senior administrative positions in both the public and private sector that ended with his retirement from American Express as its senior vice president for worldwide communications.

In a final statement he wrote about himself this fall, Buddy said he had "eschewed the role as spokesman for minority causes" because it was impossible to meet the "bottom-line demands" of his job and be a spokesman for African-Americans.

He said he worked

"behind the scenes offering advice and guidance to those who needed it, but never interceding with an employer."

Yet, Buddy Wilkinson also worked tirelessly and effectively advising several generations of black corporate executives, staff and officers, including myself, of the Urban League.

As he himself wrote, he "took pride in being a pioneer who simply wouldn't let his race stop him from moving up the corporate ladder — and, in the process, opening doors for others whom he showed it could be done."

Others took the more public approach, because the circumstances demanded it.

Such was the case with Louis L. Redding, who from the 1930s to the 1950s was the only black lawyer in the state of Delaware; Spottwood W. Robinson 3rd, a Virginia civil rights attorney; and Judge Collins J. Seitz, of Delaware.

The destinies of these three men intertwined around the bundle of legal challenges in the 1940s and early 1950s to official school segregation

that led to the 1954 *Brown* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Seitz, white, had grown up in Delaware, and graduated from the then-segregated University of Delaware and the University of Virginia Law School.

But his decision in the school segregation cases before him helped pave the way for the Warren Court's progressive thinking and progressive language. In the Supreme Court's unanimous decision, Seitz's opinions were repeatedly cited.

So, regardless of their individual characteristics, we can say that all of these men and women — some black, some white — did serve to push back the boundaries of racial discrimination, did open doors for others to follow, did inspire some to more progressive thought and to action.

A colleague of the filmmaker, Henry Hampton, said of him: "He was brilliant and caring, and that's how we're going to remember him." That's how we should remember them all, for they deserve our thanks.

Black churches must join fight to quell AIDS epidemic

By Rev. Ronald J. Weatherford
Special to Sentinel-Voice

A decade ago, the World Health Organization declared Dec. 1 as World AIDS Day. From a global perspective, Africa has been hardest hit by the pandemic.

The disease has claimed more than 3 million lives in Sub-Saharan Africa. And, more than 14 million people in the region are HIV-positive — the world's highest rate of infection.

AIDS has also taken a toll on Black America. It is one of the most serious threats to face the Black population since slavery. As of December 1997, 132,221 African-Americans had died of AIDS, the leading killer of Blacks under age 35.

More than half a million African-Americans could be infected with the virus.

Amidst reports that Blacks, who account for more than half of new HIV infections, are more than eight times more likely than Whites to contract the virus, comes a new \$156 million federal minority AIDS thrust.

Announcing the initiative, the government's first comprehensive minority AIDS effort, President Clinton noted, "The AIDS crisis in our communities of color is a national one."

Earlier this year, the Congressional Black Caucus declared that AIDS has reached a state of emergency in the Black community, and the NAACP has put AIDS on its national agenda.

The 1996 Leading for Life Summit convened by Harvard's W.E.B. DuBois Institute not only sounded the alarm but called



LV Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

In observance of World AIDS Day large sections of quilts representing deceased AIDS victims are joined together inside the Clark County Government Building's lobby.

on Black leaders and organizations to combat AIDS. Summit speakers lamented Black leaders' delayed response to the disease, which was stigmatized early on as an affliction of homosexuals and heroine users.

While rumors circulated on the street that the virus was engineered in a germ warfare laboratory to be used as a tool for racial genocide, some pastors suggested that it was punishment for sin.

So, while AIDS reached a state of emergency, the African-American community was in a state of denial.

Nowhere has the denial been more

pronounced than in the Black church.

The institution that has played such a vital role in uplifting its community shunned the controversy regarding transmission.

Instead of providing moral leadership, support services and education, the church ignored the disease's impact.

However, some ministers' groups have apologized for the church's uncharacteristic apathy. And, New York-based Balm in Gilead is leading the AIDS fight among Black religious groups.

Endorsed by all major denominations, Balm in Gilead provides training and sponsors

an annual prayer vigil to encourage intervention and prevention efforts.

Few congregations, however, go on to develop AIDS ministries or education programs. If more churches would meet the crisis head on, that would be a potent prescription for healing.

Perhaps Surgeon General David Satcher will enlist more Black churches in the war on AIDS. As part of a federal initiative to reduce disparities in the health status of minorities, Satcher is urging the churches to promote healthy lifestyles.

At last summer's convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he appealed to Black clergy, "We need the church to help us deal with the prejudice and the bias that we face as we're trying to fight this epidemic," he said.

Despite reluctance to lead the AIDS fight, Black churches have witnessed the disease's impact. In 1995, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ (which has had an AIDS ministry since 1992), asked his parishioners to stand if they knew someone who had died of AIDS — one-third of the 2,000-member congregation stood up.

The church must stand up against this disease, which is ravaging the Black community. Saving souls and saving lives are not mutually exclusive callings.

The church helped spur the civil rights movement, it should now respond in similar spirit to the AIDS epidemic.

Rev. Ronald J. Weatherford pastors two United Methodist churches in N.C.