

Black voters in Florida plan to mobilize for election

By Linda Young

Special to Sentinel-Voice
ST. PETERSBURG (NNPA)—Every vote counts in this close election year with less than 120 days until Americans choose their next president.

In 2000, a mere 537 Florida votes put the current president in office. But many times that number of Black citizens in south St. Petersburg were not registered to vote or failed to vote then, according to an analysis by the NAACP. In fact, the 18,161 currently not registered to vote represent an untapped power with potential to choose not only the next president but the next city mayor as well, said Darryl Rousón, NAACP president.

Because of their findings,

the NAACP invited 35 area organizations to join them in a non-partisan strategy forum to figure out how to mobilize this potentially powerful group to vote.

The irony of African-Americans failing to either vote or register to vote when it was so recently that innumerable people were beaten, threatened or murdered in the fight to secure that right to vote was mentioned at the forum.

Deveron Gibbons, public affairs analyst at Holland & Knight, said, "People have died to have even the opportunity to vote." Gibbons noted his own grandfather's participation in the civil rights battle as a college student at Morehouse College. Too many people gave up too much "for us to fall by the

wayside," Gibbons said and added, "we're standing on someone else's shoulders. It's time to pass it on."

Many groups have registered voters. However, the NAACP analysis also revealed that because Black males are four times more likely than White males to be imprisoned during their lifetime, the Southside has a disproportionately large number of ex-felons who cannot legally register to vote until their civil rights are restored. So, the group plans to work with them to restore their rights.

Florida is one of only seven states that does not automatically restore civil rights upon completion of a felon's prison sentence.

Mary Saunders of the Florida Committee for the

Restoration of Rights said the process to restore civil rights can take years, and former Gov. Lawton Chiles (1990-1998) was responsible for making the process more arduous.

The NAACP emphasized that the objective of the collaborative effort is to mobilize people to vote regardless of whom they vote for. Rousón emphasized that what mattered is the number of voters who choose rather than "the one chosen."

More than 50 people representing 35 groups attended the forum held at the Enoch Davis Center. Plans include formulating a week-by-week chart of action, establishing a common telephone bank for all participants to use and running a non-stop carpool to the polls on Election Day to ensure everyone has an opportunity to vote.

Alma Ayala, mobilization specialist for The Connection Partners, explained that she helped elect the first Black mayor in another state because the coalition she worked with "kept their eye on the prize." Ayala said that "obstacles were what we saw when we took our eyes off the prize."

The prize here is a potentially powerful block of what the NAACP calls "dormant" Black votes on the Southside of District 55. However, it remains to be seen if these often fractious groups can keep their eye on that prize long enough to truly work collaboratively despite their many differences.

Even party affiliation cropped up during the question and answer session when one area minister asked if he would be required to work beside a Democrat. The event

chairperson from the NAACP political action committee, Gypsy Gallardo said they could designate different days for different groups to use the telephone bank.

Fortunately, most of the work the group plans is individual effort. Because the NAACP found that too many registered African-American voters chose not to exercise their right to vote in 2000, and their plan of action also calls for reaching them on a one-to-one basis.

Gallardo said, "voter mobilization is empowerment in the Black community." She said the group's plan calls for everyone to work with at least one person they know, to discuss the issues with that person and persuade them to vote, regardless of who they vote for.

Linda Young writes for the *Weekly Challenger*.

Overstreet

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tion for a year. His behavior was so exemplary that his probation period was reduced to six months.

In the intervening decade or so Cordell has made his mark in Arizona, Ohio and now in Nevada. In Arizona he worked with the OTI Metal Finishing, Military and Aerospace Corp. from early 1994 until early 2000. He returned to Cleveland to accept a position with Cuyahoga County's Department of Workforce Development.

During his two-year return to Cleveland, as noted earlier, he spent time talking to youth groups about what it takes to turn one's life around. He gave a number of speeches on voter empowerment to groups such as the NAACP. Also, he was bitten by the political bug and ran for city council from his old Ward 3 home turf. He mounted a significant effort only to lose out to a candidate backed by former Cleveland

Mayor Mike White.

Cordell's decision to move closer to his wife Genie's West Coast home landed him in Las Vegas a short two years ago. Here in Las Vegas, he has put his skills to good use by building coalitions for political empowerment. He acts as a liaison between the African-American community and the Nevada Democratic Party. He volunteers as the non-partisan political chair for the Las Vegas Chapter of the NAACP. He is spokesperson for the Caucus of African-American Nevadans (CAAN), his brainchild.

In my estimation, Cordell is the personification of reach one, teach one. Time after time this approach has resulted in lives being saved and turned around. Given how Cordell has turned his life around and the difference he has made and is making in the lives of others, I could not be any prouder if he were my own son.

Curry

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job with my hometown newspaper. I've known that I wanted to be a journalist since I was in the 8th grade and it always bothered me that my local newspaper, among other things, carried segregated classified ads.

"The Tuscaloosa News continues to publish ads which discriminate," I observed in my written complaint to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. "This happens daily and it humiliates one of the Negro race. Enclosed is a news clipping to verify the above statement (August 20, 1965)."

Section 77 of the classifieds that day was designated "Colored Rentals." An ad under "Male Help Wanted" read: "COLORED MEN FOR CAR WASHERS, steamers and buffers. Apply in person to Circus Minit Wash, 409 Birmingham Highway." An ad in the "Female Help Wanted" section read: "WAITRESSES AND COOKS—Experienced, White—Apply in person to Pete's Steakhouse, McCrory Village or Pete's Steak House, Bridge Ave."

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights referred my complaints to the appropriate

federal agencies. Each wrote to me essentially saying there was nothing they could do about the racial discrimination. In time, however, both practices were discontinued and that can be attributed to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, became a fierce advocate of the bill and used his experience in the Senate to end what became known as Congress' longest debate.

One section of the law states, "All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation, as defined in this section, without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin."

That brought an end to the overt racism that had African-Americans taking a back seat to Whites.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the *NNPA News Service* and *BlackPressUSA.com*.

Walters

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cratic and Republican parties that confirms the right-of-center posture of American politics. John McCain is regarded as a "moderate" Republican on many issues and he often goes against the hard Right orthodoxy of his party. Nevertheless, he, like his former military hero friend John Kerry, also believes that Iraq needs more troops, in a Vietnam-styled objective of seeking victory with honor, rather than a total pull-out. So, both would continue the sink-hole policy that is wasting precious lives and economic resources.

I would be interested to know whether Kerry's choice of John McCain was approved by the Congressional Black Caucus and the civil rights leadership, or whether he even gave them the dignity of notifying them. In the last election, Black leaders were the last to learn of Al Gore's choice of Senator Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) to his vice president and they challenged this choice on the basis of Lieberman's past views on affirmative action. Well, McCain feels the same about affirmative action, so where is the rage at this slap?

Have we also become intimidated by the consensus, largely among Whites, that Ronald Reagan was good for America? Or, is it that our present leadership is too tired, having been worn down by yet another slap in the face by Democrats?

It is the responsibility of Black leaders—leaders of any group—to uphold the public integrity of that group. But there may be a new view of modern leadership that believes in sacrificing the opportunity to mobilize around integrity issues as opposed to saving such fights for more concrete bread and butter issues. The problem with that view is that one is related to the other, not separate. If the dominant community loses respect for the integrity of a group in any society, it will be difficult for the leaders of that community to get their attention for concrete needs.

Maybe Black leaders will take the opportunity of their coming summer conferences to raise these issues. I hope so, our integrity demands it.

Ron Walters is a professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland-College Park.



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