

MLK Press Conference

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not allowed on the Strip — today, we are. But today, less than one-half of 1 percent of all procurement and business opportunities that take place in Las Vegas casinos are held by African-Americans...we do not want to go into the next 100 years looking at African-Americans facing the same conditions of the past... I think that the mind-set that was exemplified by the statement made about Dr. King on his birthday, January 15, should have never been said — not any day — particularly not on his birthday.”

Williams commended the management at Channel 13 for taking swift action in their decision to fire Blair, and then went on to say that Blair’s comments were intolerable and that the problem goes deeper than the comment made and that the committee is communicating with national organizations concerning the matter.

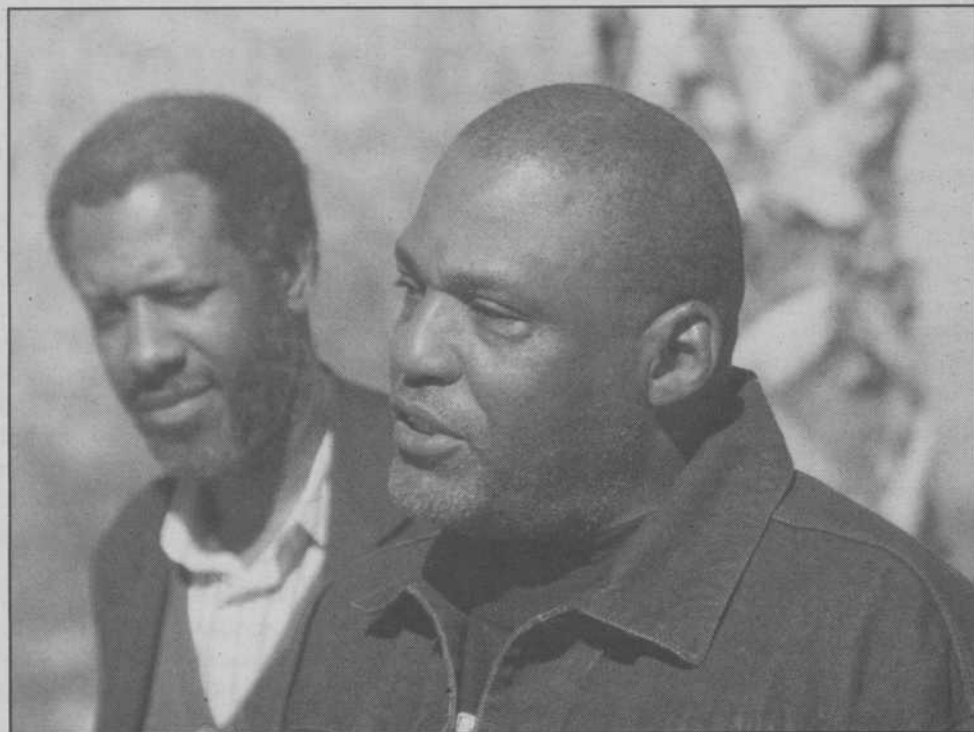
“Las Vegas is the third city of choice by African-Americans when it comes to spending their vacation and tourism dollars... maybe some of these people around the country need to know about the mind-set in our community; they may decide that this is not the city where they want to hold their conventions or spend their dollars.”

Jim Prather, vice president and general manager of KTNV, said in a written statement and also voiced on-air, that Blair “stumbled” and added, “...This kind of incident is not acceptable under any circumstances, and I’m truly sorry that this event occurred.”

NAACP President, Dean Ishman, echoed Williams’s thoughts and also commended Channel 13 for its actions. “Comments like these should not be on the air. I would like to caution the station to [review] their checks systems which allowed this to go on the air — being that it (the broadcast) is [presumably tape delayed] prior to it going on the air live.”

Linton Johnson, who is Black and a long-time friend of Blair’s, flew to Las Vegas to attend the press conference in support of his friend and former colleague.

“Rob and I became friends in 1997 in St. Louis where we worked at an NBC affiliate together... I came here today to simply let folks know that I’ve heard the tape, and he



Las Vegas NAACP President Dean Ishman (left) listens to Wendell Williams, president of the Martin Luther King Jr. Committee as he touches on the incidents that lead to the firing of KTNV Channel 13 weekend weather anchor Rob Blair.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Isaac Sawyer

(Blair) did not say ‘Coon,’ he had just finished the weather and said Coo — as in Cool.”

According to Johnson, Blair is an ally to our community who worships in Black churches and is totally devastated that he is being labeled as a racist for stumbling over his words.

Johnson is a former weekend anchor for KNTV/KBWB in San Francisco. He left the station in January 2004 and is currently in the transportation business.

ACLU Executive Director Gary Peck also spoke at the press conference and said that from his perspective, issues concerning the media and free speech and communicating to the public are issues of profound importance to the ACLU.

Peck said that this incident underscores a much broader and deeper issue that the media should be paying attention to. He said the issue is “diversity in newsrooms” and “diversity in pressrooms.”

“This may sound sort of corny coming from a tough-as-nails sort of guy, but Mar-

tin Luther King Jr. is one of my heroes — one of the inspirations in my life, and I know that’s true for tens of thousands of people throughout our community... I cannot tell you how profoundly, dispiriting it was to have to deal with this story and this incident on the heels of Dr. King’s birthday.”

Peck went on to stress the need for everyone to redouble their commitment to racial justice, to equality, to sensitivity and to diversity in our newsrooms, in our pressrooms and in our community at large. “As Wendell said, we have come a long way, but the Lord knows that we have an immensely long way yet to go.”

During Saturday’s 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. newscast, Blair made this statement: “On a weather report earlier this morning, I made an accidental slip of the tongue when talking about the Martin Luther King holiday, and what I said was interpreted by many viewers as highly offensive. For that, I offer my deepest apology. I in no way intended to offend anyone.

I’m very sorry.”

Johnson feels that the reaction to Blair’s comment is a character assassination against his friend, and said that the apology Blair gave was written by Channel 13 management and that Blair had been instructed to read the apology verbatim.

Johnson became emotional when Gene Collins, Director of the Las Vegas Chapter of NAN, said, “For a person of this young man’s caliber to be so loose with his tongue is totally unacceptable.” Collins further stated that “Hindsight is always 20/20, and I know that the young man feels very badly for what he said and what he did.”

It was at this point that Johnson interrupted Collins while he was speaking by shouting out to Collins, “How do you know how he feels? Have you talked to him? Do you know him?”

Johnson collected himself and announced that he would remain after the press conference to answer questions

about his reasons for supporting Blair.

Collins said that he will be speaking with Reverend Al Sharpton this weekend in Sacramento about the comments made by Blair.

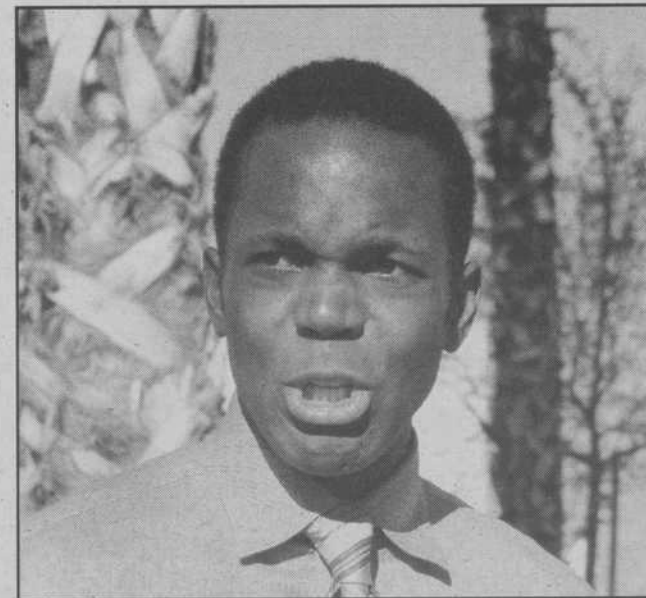
Chairperson of the MLK Civil Right Committee, Patricia Cunningham, also addressed the group and emphasized that we cannot lose sight of the bigger issue — which is the racial makeup of newsrooms in Las Vegas and across the nation. She reminded the group and pointed out that these are the newsrooms that directly impact how minorities are depicted across the country and the world.

“There are producers, there are editors, and there are directors — there are people in place when there is a tape-delayed broadcast to catch these kinds of mistakes... In all fairness to this young man, we need keep in sight the goals and dreams of Dr. King — which was never to see a man’s reputation destroyed, or to see a career destroyed... We must find out if there are statistics being kept on the racial makeup

of minorities in newsrooms, and why the safeguards were not in place to make sure that (Blair’s) mistake did not air... It is important that we hear the tape, so that those of us who did not hear the statement, [and those who] only read the print media’s account, can know exactly what was said. He (Blair) deserves that consideration, because we have a responsibility, not only as African-Americans, but also as members of the Martin Luther King Jr. committee, to make sure that everyone is treated equally and that we are forgiving.”

Johnson said that Blair will not make himself available for comment, but did confide in him that although he does not understand why God choose him for this happen to, his belief and hope is that some good will come out if it for Las Vegas.

The next step, according to Williams, is to work with national organizations to collectively make sure that diversity and inclusion become a top priority on Nevada’s list of issues to address — and then to monitor the progress that is made.



Sentinel-Voice photo by Dianna Saffold

Linton Johnson, a friend of Rob Blair, who twice disparaged Martin Luther King’s name during a KTNV newscast, defended Blair as decent, and certainly not a racist.

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