

# Baltimore airport being renamed for Marshall

By Sean Yoes

Special to Sentinel-Voice

BALTIMORE (NNPA) — Emmett Burns Jr., the delegate representing District 10 in Baltimore County, recently said when he dies, he wants his body flown from Thurgood Marshall Baltimore Washington International Airport in Baltimore to Medgar Evers International Airport in his home state of Mississippi.

Last week, at least one part of Burns' vision has come to fruition. On the last day of this year's legislative session in Annapolis, the Senate passed a bill to change Baltimore Washington International Airport to BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport.

The Senate vote was 33-13. The House had previously passed its own version of the legislation, HB 189, which was sponsored by Burns.

The final amended version of the House bill passed

with a 101-31 vote.

"I'm elated. It was an uphill battle from day one and it was uphill until the Senate voted," Burns said the day after the vote.

Sen. Joan Carter Conway (D-Dist. 43) is co-chair of the Committee on Education, Health and Environmental Affairs, which held final hearings on the bill. And although she acknowledges being "very happy" about adding Marshall's name to BWI, she says the battle to make it happen isn't really over.

"I worked really hard to get the bill out of committee. I wasn't confident that it was going to happen. Right now, we know that the airport will be renamed, but we don't have a timetable for when it will happen," said Conway.

"But when I think about his [Marshall's] legacy, it's a tremendous honor," she said.

Yet, there are still a couple of issues to contend with, ac-



George E.C. Hayes, Thurgood Marshall, and James Nabrit, following the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation ruling. On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" facilities were considered sufficient to satisfy the Fourteenth Amendment. This decision established a pattern in American society, until May 17, 1954, when the court reversed the *Plessy* decision. In the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* (argued for Brown by Marshall, then a lawyer), the court held that segregation of public schools is a denial of equal protection under the law.

ording to Conway. She says the \$250,000 that was initially earmarked for the bill was taken out during the legislative process. And it will be up to Gov. Robert Ehrlich—who has gone on record in support of the renaming—to find money to facilitate all elements of the name change, including changing all the signage associated with BWI airport. In addition, the state Board of Public Works, which consists of Ehrlich; William Donald Schaefer, the state's comptroller; and Nancy Kopp, the state's treasurer, must ultimately approve the renaming of the airport. Two of the board's three members must vote in the affirmative, and the general consensus is that the votes are there.

"We're confident about that — the state's treasurer, Nancy Kopp, and the governor have pledged their support, and there's no reason why the comptroller

[Schaefer] won't vote for it," said Larry S. Gibson, a professor of law at the University of Maryland.

Gibson, who played an integral role in pushing the Marshall legislation through the General Assembly, is recognized as one of the nation's most knowledgeable scholars on Marshall's life and legacy.

"Here's the real significance of this," said Gibson. "An airport is the state's gateway to the world. Thousands of people enter Maryland from other parts of the country and the world. A state establishes what it is most proud of in its airport, and what Maryland will be saying by renaming BWI is that it is proud of this native son, Thurgood Marshall."

Said Gibson, "He was the most important constitutional lawyer in the nation's history, and future generations will be reminded of his contributions."

## Community activist Damu Smith fights colon cancer

By Hazel Trice Edney

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA)—Anti-war and community activist Damu Smith is receiving phone calls and e-mails by the hundreds. Funds are being raised and plans are being made. As usual, Smith is focused and strategizing for battle.

But the battle this time is not another peace march in the Middle East. It's not another vigil for environmental justice in Black and poor communities. It's not another campus rally for racial sensitivity. Nor is it any of the other causes Smith has championed for more than three decades.

Damu Smith has been diagnosed with colon cancer. And in this campaign, he is fighting for his life. When a physician at Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C. told him he had cancer, Smith almost reflexively went into his normal battle mode.

"My whole life just rolled like a video in front of me," he recalls.

After about 20 minutes, Smith had a firm talk with himself. He asked himself, "Okay. What are you going to do?" And he began answering his own question. "I just started thinking, 'I've got to live. I've got to live. I've got to live. I've got to live.' The shock began to ease as I started going into the next phase of my thought process. And I said, 'I've got to fight back. I've just got to fight back with whatever I have to deal with this.' That's all I could think about was fighting."

That's what he does best.

For Smith, 53, the fight started a long time ago. At the age of 17, he was inspired by poet Amiri Baraka during a high school field trip to Cairo, Ill., a racially-tense town for years. It was then that Smith decided he wanted to become an activist.

He was on such a mission when he fell ill. Smith was a member of a U. S. delegation to Palestine preparing to lead a Palm Sunday march there when he fainted while resting against a car. He went into a seizure.

"A White woman from Alabama revived me, Palestinian doctors and nurses took care of me," he says. Mary Wade, a White nurse practitioner from Birmingham, Ala., another member of the American delegation, helped care for him until he was rushed in an ambulance to a Bethlehem hospital.

"They never used the C-word. I found out later that was kind of an orchestrated thing. People didn't want me to know exactly what they were seeing. They just wanted me to get on the plane and to get me to a hospital as soon as possible," he recalls.

The march went on without him.

"All of the delegation came over to see me after the march," he says.

He was a part of the delegation as president of Black Voices for Peace, an anti-war organization he founded five years ago. Though feeling weak and sickly, during the trip, he says he came away with some strong conclusions about the way Palestinians are being mistreated by the Israelis.

"The Jews have built illegal settlements inside of the occupied territories. So, in order to protect the Jewish settlers, there is a sophisticated security apparatus that includes check-points. When Palestinians come to these check-points, they have to wait in long lines. They have to be searched. They're cursed at. They are looked down upon by these young soldiers, some of whom are 18 and 19 years old, exerting power over them. They are delayed in getting places sometimes two and three hours," he says.

"The entire population has been criminalized. When I was on my way to the airport to leave the country, we were delayed 30 minutes, searching the car, all of this because the driver was a Palestinian who comes there every day."

It was Wednesday, March 23, when Smith left Palestine for the U.S., three days beyond his planned departure date. "We arrived back at 8 o'clock in the morning. I was checking into Providence at 4 p.m."

There, a physician broke the news.

"When I was at the emergency room in the triage in Providence Hospital, he looked at the X-rays from Palestine and said, 'Damu, you have cancer — colorectal cancer.' Oooh, it hit me like a ton of bricks in my belly. And I just sat there motionless for several minutes. I was in a state of shock, semi-shock because I kind of knew that I was going to hear that." His father, Sylvester Smith, died of colon cancer in 1989 at the age of 53, the same age Damu is now.

"I sat on my bed for several minutes just shaking my head and saying, 'Oh, no, no.' I started getting mad at myself because I probably ignored too many of the warning signs. So, I started beating up on myself for a few minutes with a combination of anger, shock, fear, all traveling through my psyche simultaneously," he recounts during an interview in his D. C. apartment.

Smith has a 12-year-old-daughter, Asha, whom he calls "the crown jewel" of his life. Though she lives with her mother, Smith has joint custody and single-mindedness when it comes to her future.

"Everything that went through my mind were thoughts about her, the possibility of leaving her early, the thoughts of her not having me around, her feeling sad, her being hurt. She was essential to my thought process at that moment," Smith remembers.

A surgeon told him that people with his progression of the disease usually have three to six months to live. He says, "That was the second ton of bricks."

But friends would not let the St. Louisan remain buried under the bricks.

"There's so much love coming at me right now from so many different sources," he states. "I've gotten calls from people that I haven't gotten calls from in a long time — friends and family members, prominent individuals. That army has been something."

A network of what he calls "angels" is coordinating fundraising and care for Smith.

Joia Jefferson, who has helped to coordinate and publicize his protests and other events for more than 20 years, is among the coordinators of fundraising events to be announced around the country to help with his medical and personal expenses. The goal is to raise at least \$150,000.

The e-mail address for more information is [spiritofhope@thepraxisproject.org](mailto:spiritofhope@thepraxisproject.org). Cards, letters and donations may be sent to The Praxis Project, 1750 Columbia Rd. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. Online donations may also be made at <http://www.thepraxisproject.org/damu.html>.

Smith has not had healthcare insurance since he served for 10 years as a toxics campaigner and national associate director of Greenpeace USA. He left Greenpeace about four years ago to establish the National Black Environmental Justice Network, which fights against contaminated water and toxic waste dumps in Black neighborhoods.

"Right now, he's going to need all his energy in order to fight this illness. What we want to do... those who support him and love him and have been benefiting from his work for his whole life, we want to take a moment here to honor the work that he's done," Jefferson says. "Damu is probably one of the most selfless people I have ever met. Damu wakes every morning, committed to curing the ills for the Black community in this country and around the world. He has dedicated the entire 53 years of his life to empowering Black people. Damu today stands as somebody who I know has aided our lives. And now we have to stand and aid him. We want to honor what he's done and also make him comfortable enough that all he has to do now is get well."

And that's not easy.

He frowns as he drinks a bitter mixture of natural dietary supplements at the dining table in his apartment. Friends have told him the natural supplements are often better than

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