



MUST BE THE SHOES

Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

David C. Burr, left, and Maurice Page, far right, of Wells Fargo present a \$2,500 check on Tuesday at the West Las Vegas Library Theatre to representatives Barbara Coleman, left, and Jani Jeppe of the Las Vegas-Clark County Library District and "Sweet" Lou Collins, program co-founder, for the 11th Shoes for Children benefit drive. The money will be used to purchase athletic shoes for needy area school children. Shoes and donations will be accepted through the end of the drive December 18 and can be dropped off at all district library branches.

Sharpton delays TV commercials

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - In the face of mounting criticism over a plan to do television commercials for a car title company that charges interest rates of 300 percent, Al Sharpton said he has now placed his plans on hold until he can obtain more financial data from the firm. "We're putting everything on hold in terms of this national tour and advertising

and marketing. We put it off until [LoanMax] gets me this data," Sharpton said in an interview, referring to an agreement he has been doing for LoanMax. "Out of respect to [the company], I'm giving [its representative] time to show me. But, if he doesn't have it, then I'm definitely going to tell the world that he had time and he didn't come through with nothing. ...If he's got the facts, then I will make the suspension perma-

nent." Keith Corbett, senior vice president of the Durham, N.C.-based Center for Responsible Lending, a non-profit think tank, told Sharpton in a letter that his commercial airing during prime-time morning news shows in the Washington, D.C., Virginia and Maryland areas were deeply disappointing. "Over the last few years you have been instrumental

in the fight to end predatory lending. Specifically, you lent your voice to stopping predatory lending in North Carolina by urging our Black Caucus leaders to work to put an end to these abusive practices within our state." Corbett writes. "Therefore, I was surprised to hear that you are a spokesperson for car title loans... Car title loans are just as abusive as payday loans in that they charge (See Sharpton, Page 14)

Gotti

(Continued from Page 3)
closer to God. He also promised that his legal troubles were behind him for good.

"I'm never going to get into any other trouble, no jay-walking, nothing," he told reporters.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Sean Haran said he would respect the jury's verdict.

The Lorenzo brothers had faced up to 20 years in prison if convicted. They were accused of agreeing to launder money for Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff, a man a prosecutor called "one of the biggest, baddest, most dangerous drug lords in New York City."

McGriff allegedly funneled more than \$1 million in drug money through Murder Inc. in return for providing protection for the Lorenzos. A government wit-

ness who once worked at the label testified that he saw a "huge amount" of money delivered in shopping bags and a shoe box.

Murder Inc. cut tens of thousands of dollars in checks for corporations controlled by McGriff, including a movie company that produced a straight-to-video film called "Crime Partners 2000." The label also covered his expenses as he traveled around the country, ostensibly working as an entertainment executive.

The defense said the Lorenzos were legitimate businessmen whose associations with McGriff were legal. The brothers said they decided to invest their own money in McGriff's movie because he was an old friend from their Queens neighborhood.

The trial was a spectacle for celebrity watchers.

Courtroom supporters included Jay-Z, Fat Joe and Russell Simmons, along with Ja Rule and Ashanti, the platinum-selling artists signed by the defendant's Murder Inc. label.

Ja Rule, on hand for the verdict, said he was elated.

"I can't even explain the feeling that's in my body."

Murder Inc. changed its name to The Inc. last year after executives said the label's image was hurt by the racketeering case.

Christopher Lorenzo said outside the courthouse Friday that the gangster motif, including his brother's adoption of the "Gotti" name, was always just show business.

"You want to know his real name?" he said. "It's Mago, because he squints

all the time."

He said the pair would now work on reviving the business, which he said had been hurt financially by case's "black cloud."

FEMA legislation eyes minorities

By James Wright
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, the top Democrat on the House of Representatives' Homeland Security Committee, has sponsored legislation that would ensure that small, minority and disadvantaged businesses participate in rebuilding areas ravaged by Hurricane Katrina.

The bill, the FEMA Small Business Database Act, would require that the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security create a permanent national database of small and disadvantaged businesses that could serve as prime contractors in the response and recovery phases of natural disasters and other emergencies.

Thompson has been active in making sure that small businesses receive federal contracts from FEMA to clean up the Gulf Coast region. "This legislation will create a roster, a list of companies on the basis of geographical location, that will be ready to work when a disaster happens," Thompson said. "Our office has gotten inquiries from local businesses about how to get a contract to help clean up and rebuild the area."

Only 5 percent of the businesses in Louisiana, Thompson said, have received FEMA contracts to clean up that state. He noted that 1.6 percent of Mississippi businesses have gotten contracts from FEMA.

In Alabama, 5 percent of the clean-up and recovery work is done by state businesses.

Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., who represents a major part of New Orleans, said big companies are getting first consideration on contract bids. That is taking place all over the affected region, he said.

Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee, D-Texas, said the frustration level in Houston is "really high," and "people are not able to get through the system to find out what to do to get a clean-up contract."

"That is not right," she said. "People in a disaster should have a hand in cleaning up the area."

The bill has the support of the Congressional Black Caucus, Thompson said.

The Washington, D.C., area has a host of Black businesses that have the technical expertise and manpower to help rebuild the Gulf Coast region. Thompson said he is working with the National Association of Minority Contractors to pair small businesses in the Washington, D.C., area with businesses in the affected areas.

Thompson blamed the Bush administration for the slow response to small and disadvantaged businesses.

"This administration shows almost no interest in small businesses," he said. "This is reflected in the way they have tried to relegate this process to the margins. To them, cleaning up after major disasters is only for big businesses."

Thompson testified before the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship on Nov. 8 regarding the exclusion of small and disadvantaged businesses from FEMA's contracting pool.

James Wright writes for Afro Newspapers.

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