

# Remembering Damu Smith: 1952-2006

By George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When a person dies, a dash is placed between the year of his or her birth and the death year. That dash symbolizes what happened between the time that person entered the earth and the point of departure. In the case of Damu Smith, who died last week, he crammed more into his 54 years on earth than people who live twice as long. Yet, the feeling lingers that he left us too soon.

Always quick to greet others with a broad smile and a robust hug, Damu Smith, with his boundless energy, resembled a meteorite looking for a place to land. He was perpetually in motion. Damu traveled at warp speed and didn't have much patience for those who only wanted to travel at the speed of light. There was always an air of urgency about him, because he didn't know how long he would be on this earth. He didn't know when he would come to the end of his dash.

Damu was a man of integrity. Washington, D.C., is a city where after shaking another person's hand, you're tempted to look down to make sure all of your fingers are intact. Yet, Damu, living in Washington, was able to transcend the culture of pinstriped suits, business cards and selfishness and remain genuine.

He was also a visionary. Long before most of us had heard the terms environmental racism or environmental justice, Damu recognized the danger of people unknowingly being exposed to toxic waste. The communities targeted as dumping grounds were populated by people of color and the poor, the very people least able to defend themselves. But

Damu defended them, first as a staffer for Greenpeace USA and later as founder of the National Black Environmental Justice Network.

He and other activists drew national attention to a polluted stretch of land between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, labeling it Cancer Alley. Petrochemical officials argue that they created jobs for local residents. But Damu and others argued that they caused cancer and other dreaded diseases, and numerous studies support their view.

Writing for the website, SeeingBlack.com, investigative reporter Ron Nixon noted: "Nationally, a 1987 study by the United Church of Christ's Commission on Racial Justice found Blacks were four times more likely to live in areas with toxic and hazardous waste



GEORGE E. CURRY

sites than Whites. A 1992 investigation by the National Law Journal found that when government does enforce environmental regulations and fine companies, fines are much higher in White communities than in Black ones.

"In Louisiana, reports by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and an unreleased report by the U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency (EPA) Region Six have raised concerns about the location of chemical plants and their possible impact on the health of their neighbors, who are primarily people of color."

Prior to those findings, Damu was a lonely voice in the wilderness. But that was his style. Rather than follow a pack, Damu would rather take the road less traveled or, better yet, the one not traveled at all.

Like Dr. King, the St. Louis native saw a connection between militarism and social injustice. And he became a leader of the anti-war movement, creating Black Voices for Peace. In fact, he was on a peace mission to Palestine preparing to lead a Palm Sunday march when he became ill and was rushed to a Bethlehem hospital.

It was not until he was at Providence Hospital in Washington that he was told he was in the most serious stage of colorectal cancer. I visited Damu as soon as I learned he was in the hospital. He was always one of my biggest supporters when I was editor of *Emerge* magazine, so I presented him with an anthology I had edited, "The Best of *Emerge* Magazine." He thanked me and expressed appreciation for my finding time to visit him.

I told him to dispense with the formalities. He was — and is — a natural treasure, I assured him, and a visit to the hospital was nothing compared to how he had dedicated his life to uplifting his people.

When I left Providence Hospital, Damu was doing the same thing as when I entered — he was calling people on his cell phone, more concerned about others than his own health. I pleaded with him to get some rest and he promised that he would. I am not sure he did. Until his final days, he was still working, even participating in peace marches to his doctors' chagrin. Damu was given three to six months to live, but he survived more than a year. But he always defied the odds. And Damu has the dash to prove it.

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

## Isn't time ripe for a march for Black people?

By James Clingman  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Can you believe all the attention and consternation caused by the recent demonstrations and protests on behalf of illegal immigrants? Millions of people out in the streets, standing up for their "rights," boycotting, stopping traffic, and doing an in-your-face reality check all over this country. The issue of illegal immigrants has taken center stage, and there may be no turning back. Like my man, Gil Scott-Heron said in his timeless stirring tribute to Jose Campos Torres, this country needed some "new n——s." And as Claud Anderson has been saying for more than a decade, "If you (Black people) didn't get anything when you were in second place in this country, what do you think you are going to get in third, maybe even fourth place?"

Yes, the nation's attention is now focused on the plight of the immigrants. The only non-immigrants in this country, the only ones who

suffered slavery, Jim Crow, and blatant discrimination, even to this present day, are not even a blip on the social radar screen. The people with whose labor this country was built, the lives of those from which this country's wealth was obtained, Black people of African descent, are no longer the n——s of America. Well, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

We didn't sneak into this country; we did not come here voluntarily in the relative comfort of ships; we were not given sanctuary on these shores; we were not sworn in as citizens of the U.S.; we were not allowed to participate in the Gold Rush and the Land Grab; our businesses were not subsidized by the government; we were not included in the Declaration of Independence; and, despite



JAMES CLINGMAN

using our talents and skills to cultivate the land, to harvest the cash crops, to invent new tools and conveniences, to care for White children, to clean the homes of White folks, to serve them and fight their wars, despite all of that and more, we were not even considered 100 percent human in the U.S. Constitution.

Not only do we not count to the rest of this country, we obviously don't count to ourselves. Why? Did you notice some of our so-called leaders marching and supporting the immigrant cause? Hey, nothing against the immigrants for seeking an edge in this "land of opportunity," but give me a break, Black folks! After nearly 400 years since we "officially" entered this country, don't you think we would have held our march, our boycott, our demonstration, our

protest by now? I can hear you saying, "But we had ours in the 1960s when we marched and boycotted and demonstrated for civil rights."

Yes, we did. But what about our economic rights? We are still at the bottom of every economic category in this country. Why? Maybe it's because we have not brought this country to a screeching halt for a day or even a week. Maybe we are being pushed to the end of the line because we have not been serious in our indignation at being mistreated in the country that our fathers built. Maybe we are just such nice people, and we willingly subjugate ourselves in deference to other groups, especially White people.

I don't know what it is about us, but I sure am ready for a Black people's march; I am ready for "Blackout," a day without the labor of Black folks. If people who are in this country illegally can do it and make such an

(See Clingman, Page 12)

## LaGrande

(Continued from Page 10)

used to? Frequently price gouging is spoken of in terms of profiteering, that is, pricing products or services unreasonably high during an emergency or disaster. Unfortunately, it took Bush's fall to a 65 percent disapproval rating for him to finally call for an investigation into whether oil companies are price gouging or not.

From my perspective, I'm not sure how far that investigation will go, since, for starters, the Democrats have been calling for it for a while now—while the GOP seemed to ignore their outcry intentionally. But had the investigation taken place, just maybe, we might not be paying in excess of \$3 per gallon for gas and, ultimately, why should Bush issue a call for an investigation when I'm sure that his family is heavily invested in the oil industry—the same industry that is recording record profits.

However, one of the things that we must not lose sight of is that while we (the public) might not realize it, artificially driving down the price would end up creating a worse situation: shortages, long lines at the pump, and people stranded on the highway with empty tanks. And in the longer term, it would mean less investment in increasing energy supply, including those that do not depend on fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are energy-rich substances that have formed from long-buried plants and microorganisms. Fossil fuels, which include petroleum, coal and natural gas, provide most of the energy that powers modern industrial society. The gasoline that fuels our cars, the coal that powers many electrical plants, and the natural gas that heats our homes are all fossil fuels.

So, in fact, the real problem is not expensive gasoline, but cheap gasoline. Higher prices will give people an incentive to buy

more fuel-efficient vehicles. Automakers will have an incentive to invent and build them. Public transportation will begin to look more attractive. New energy sources will become more economically competitive. And finally, we will become less addicted to fossil fuel.

A recent General Accounting Office investigation concluded that gasoline refiners have intentionally limited their capacity to keep gasoline prices high and their profits up.

For the consumer, these higher energy costs are a disaster for our purses and further stagnates our economy.

The *Washington Post* ran an article a month ago outlining the fact that while the average local gas station only marked up their prices five percent, oil refiners marked up their prices 255 percent.

While demand has increased, oil companies have decreased supply by limiting re-

finery capacity which has yielded gross excessive profits. So, the refineries, in fact, are guilty of price gouging. The facts are already in; so Bush just needs to look at the GAO report.

While certainly, based on all accounts, gas prices will be going up more before they will be coming down; we are at the mercy of our elected officials. Once again, we need to let our concerns be known. If we don't say anything, then maybe we deserve what we get.

Nobody disputes that the oil companies should be able to make a profit.

The problem is they have us by the balls. Nearly all transportation modes in this country, from the diesel/electric locomotives pulling the freight, to Vera's hybrid, need oil for fuel and lubrication. If we can't afford the price of oil, this country grinds to a standstill.

And that's a scary thought!