Young talent soars at ACT-SO contest

By Debbie Hall
Sentinel-Voice

It was a celebration of the revitalization and the welcome return of ACT-SO to Las Vegas. Students, advisors, entertainers, coaches, volunteers and proud family members celebrated the winners of the 2006 ACT-SO competition at the House of Blues inside Mandalay Bay recently.

ACT-SO, the nationally recognized name, stands for the Afro Academic Cultural Technological Science Olympics founded by Vernon Jarrett, a renowned author and journalist.

Jarrett wanted to honor scientific achievements by students.

He saw the acclaim sporting activities received and felt science should garner the same respect.

The first national competition was held in 1978 in Portland, Ore., and the program has continued throughout the country, although there was a period of inactivity here for nearly a decade.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

A group of talented teenagers competed in the Afro Academic Cultural Technological Science Olympics, or ACT-SO, run by the Las Vegas chapter of the NAACP. The awards ceremony took place inside Mandalay Bay at the House of Blues.

The NAACP sponsors ACT-SO to encourage high academic and cultural achievement for African-American high school students allowing them to compete.

It is also a program of coaches, mentors and community involvement.

After a nine-year hiatus in Las Vegas, ACT-SO returned with help of its sponsors: Nevada Partners, Culinary Union Local 226, Lamelle McMorris of Perennial Strategy and Perennial Sports and Entertainment, Rainbow Medical Centers, Sierra Health Services, State Senator Steven Horsford and Toyota Financial Services Bank.

The International House of Blues Foundation, a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization, is dedicated to bringing the arts to schools and communities through support for or hosting programs like ACT-SO.

Anika Johnson, a former coordinator of ACT-SO, spoke about the program being revised in 2006.

"As a co-founder of the actual program in Nevada, I am absolutely delighted — overwhelmed — to see ACT-SO performing in Las Vegas. The ACT-SO program is an awesome, awesome program I am glad to see it instituted in Las Vegas," Johnson expressed.

Dean Ishman, NAACP Las Vegas Chapter President, couldn't agree more. "This is so special. We waited a long time and I know I personally lobbied to have this ACT-SO competition for three years and it's finally here... I thank God for Senator Horsford and Detrick Sanford [of Nevada Partners] for making this a reality."

The ceremony began with an invocation by Ishman, and the ceremony was hosted by Sanford, ACT-SO Coordinator, and Melissa Beevers, Miss Black Nevada USA 2006. Delisco, winner of E! Networks reality show, "The Entertainer," and headliner at the Las Vegas Hilton for the past year, provided an electrifying performance.

But the big moments were the announcement of the winners in the five categories: the sciences, humanities, performing arts, visual arts and business. Winners in 2006 included students focused on the specific areas of architecture, dance, drawing, dramatics, instrumental/classical, instrumental/contemporary, oratory, original essay, painting, photography, poetry, and vocal contemporary.

Instrumental/classical category winner Mikyala Steptoe, pianist, said she got started with ACT-SO when "one of our friends [along] with my great grandmother got me involved." Steptoe has been playing piano since she was three years old.

"I played Beethoven's Sonata in C Minor. That song is good for competition because of the finger work involved," she said, explaining her competitive edge.

In the future, Steptoe hopes to perform music for a living.

She added, "[ACT-SO] is a very interesting program with an emphasis on leadership, networking and things

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ways is, rather than about the substance of what is being proposed. And you know, I'm trying to talk about the substance of what they're proposing to do and the truth of the matter is there is no precedent for that."

Watt continues, "We are neither condoning, nor forgiving anything. All we're trying to do is have a consistent set of rules that will apply to everybody so that we can go home and articulate what the standards are. I'd be just as concerned if he was a non-CBC member."

Democrats have much at stake this election year. To win at least 15 House seats, a simple majority, could mean historic committee chairmanships for several members of the CBC, including Rangel, who would likely chair Ways and Means.

Jefferson says the eagerness for that power is one of the reasons behind the move to oust him.

"Nancy is overcome by this desire to be speaker so much until she's getting close to losing her soul over these matters," Jefferson says in an interview with the NNPA News Service. "Whatever she thinks is going to help to get there; she's just stepping over it to get there."

Pelosi insists that her only motive is to uphold high ethical standards for the House. She says she has joined in Jefferson's federal suit requesting his papers back from the FBI. President Bush has temporarily sealed the documents.

But Jefferson says the only fair way to oust him from the committee would be if the House would conduct its own investigation and find wrongdoing.

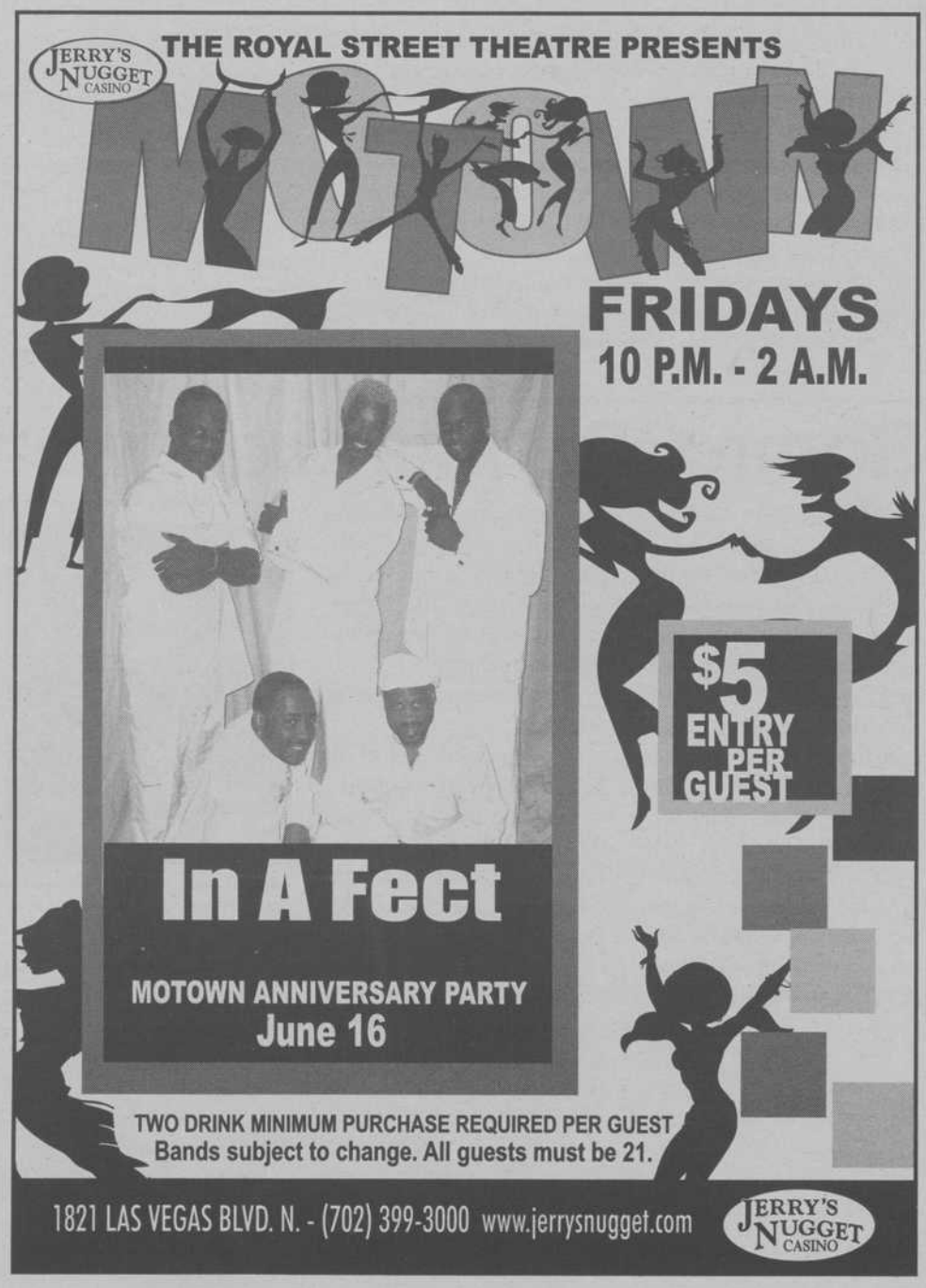
"There's been no investigation by the House or by Nancy. She's basing her conclusions on news reports and collected pieces of information. We have an ethics process around here that should be underway that could take testimony and look at issues that decide them, according to ethical rules and due process," Jefferson explains.

"That's what you would expect of the highest deliberative body in the world. That's certainly what you would expect from Democrats who always tout themselves as the champions of fairness and non-discrimination."

For Pelosi, and some others, the evidence reported by the FBI appears to be damaging enough, including admissions by former staff and business associates that they assisted in bribing the Congressman and $90,000 in marked bills found in his home freezer.

"Giving him the benefit of the doubt for a long time, our Caucus had chosen not to take any action," Pelosi says. "Then, it became clear that perhaps for temporary arrangements anyway, Mr. Jefferson should step off the Ways and Means Committee, deal with his issues, then come back with his full seniority intact. Every step of the way, we were trying to be protective of Mr. Jefferson's rights."

Watt is not persuaded.

"We need a standard. That's what this is about. It's not about whether Bill Jefferson is guilty or innocent. It's about the fact that there is no historic precedent," he says.

"There is no existing rule in fairness regarding a consistent rule that everybody knows will be applied to everybody in the same circumstance… If you don't have that, then the majority will always make up the rules as they go along."