

Blind Blacks envision brighter future

By Chris Nisan

Special to Sentinel-Voice

MINNEAPOLIS (NNPA) - "The biggest problem we face is not being blind, it's dealing with the public reaction to you being blind," says Michelle Gittens. "With education and proper training, blindness does not have to be a tragedy."

Gittens is a student currently working toward a master's degree in music at the McNally Smith College of Music. She is a professional R&B and jazz vocalist — and she also happens to be blind. She talked with the *Spokesman-Recorder* last week about some of the

struggles and challenges of being blind and Black.

Gittens also describes some of the successes she's had in combating discrimination based on her blindness as well as the fight she has waged to throw off the negative self-perception she had once associated with her blindness.

Some of the biggest challenges facing blind people are the hidden, yet very real and deep-seated social prejudices associated with blindness and people who are blind, explains Carrie Gilmer, president of Minnesota Parents of Blind Children.

"[The mainstream] media usually prints articles that applaud the blind person who can cross the street, have friends, or get a job, as rising above great tragedy with superhuman strength. They never want to talk about the discrimination and stereotypes and do not understand the nature of it. They do not get the often subtle forms that are nonetheless devastating," says Gilmer.

The prejudice and discrimination Gittens and Gilmer speak of most often take the form of social paternalism toward the blind, both on the institutional level and in the realm of interpersonal

relationships.

This paternalism leads to discrimination against sightless people in all areas of life, including employment, education, housing, and access to government services. This discrimination occurs most often under the rationalization that the blind can't do anything for themselves and are incapable of truly independent functioning.

According to Gittens, paternalistic attitudes also lead to some outrageous behavior toward the blind on the part of sighted people. "If I get on the bus and don't sit in the handicapped seats, I often have people tell me, 'You're not supposed to sit here,'" says Gittens. "You have people who just come up and put their hands on you. On several occasions I've even had people walk up and start to pray over me."

Paternalism often has damaging consequences for the blind person in that it hampers their social, educational and personal development.

"There are lots of blind people who are crippled by fear and inappropriate depen-

dence," says Gilmer.

Gilmer and her husband, Phillip Richardson, have learned a good deal about blindness through the experience of fighting against the public school system for the rights and dignity of their 15-year-old son Jordan, who is also blind.

Jordan is currently a 4.0 honors freshman. He was accepted as one of the top 12 blind high school students in the nation to attend a summer science camp sponsored by the National Federation of the Blind and NASA.

"I really wanted to get accepted to the Rocket On! Program; when I found out I was, I felt great," said Jordan.

Just a few of the statistics on blind people in the areas of employment and education provide a glimpse of the scope of the socially imposed challenges confronting the sightless.

According to Gilmer, in 1940 the unemployment rate among blind people stood at a staggering 98 percent nationally. Most of the two percent who were employed had make-work jobs as basket weavers or broom makers in

special industries that ruthlessly exploited them, often paying less than minimum wages.

Today, the blind unemployment rate is around 75 percent, said Gilmer. Only 10 percent of the blind children in U.S. schools receive instruction in Braille. Gilmer also highlights the correlation between discrimination in education and chances for employment with the fact that 90 percent of the 25 percent of blind people who are employed are fluent in Braille.

"Not working is the biggest problem," says Gittens. "It's dehumanizing."

One of the milestones in the history of blind people's struggle for justice and dignity was the founding in 1940 of the National Federation of the Blind. The organization has 50,000 members in 700 local chapters and 52 affiliates, and it has become the leading force in the country in the fight to defend the interests of the blind.

According to Gilmer, "The organized blind modeled their civil rights strategy (See *Blind*, Page 14)

Guardsmen

(Continued from Page 1)

the mayor's request after a bloody weekend in which six people were killed.

"Criminals, hear me loud, hear me clearly: There is law and order in New Orleans," she said. "We will not let the criminals take root as our families return."

The troops, dressed in full camouflage fatigues, carried M-16s, handguns and belt clips of ammunition as they arrived in a convoy of 75 vehicles. They parked their Humvees and tanker trucks in formation in front of the Convention Center, drawing waves and thumbs-up from onlookers.

Up to 200 more Guardsmen will be sent in later, bringing the total in the city to 300. In addition, 60 state police officers were sent to help keep the peace.

As the soldiers arrived, New Orleans police were investigating another slaying, that of a 22-year-old man. The killing brought this year's murder toll to 54. That number is still less than the 81 recorded during the first four months of 2005. But New Orleans' population these days is less than half of what it was before Katrina.

The bloodshed has raised fears that violence is back on the rise in a city that was plagued by crime before Katrina drove out half its population of 465,000.

Community leaders are afraid the violence will discourage people from returning.

King Milling, a New Orleans banker, said he was "just delighted" by the troops' arrival. "The powers-that-be recognize that this is an issue that we must deal with," he said.

Many of the soldiers that arrived Tuesday were sent to New Orleans during Katrina, but they had not seen the city since those desperate days.

Sgt. Alfred Gasper of Baton Rouge looked for signs of appreciation as he steered a tan Humvee down Interstate 10 into the heart of the city.

"There you go," he said, pointing to a man stopped on the side of the highway and waving. "People down here didn't want us to leave — they felt very safe."

Later, the troops marched to an office building at the port of New Orleans, where they were briefed on their mission.

Guard Lt. Col. Pete Schneider said that patrols started later than scheduled because of a communications glitch, but that troops were on the ground as of Tuesday night.

"We were running late. We were a little anxious in getting out there," Schneider said.

Mayor Ray Nagin had asked for help from the National Guard and state police on Monday after five teenagers in an SUV were gunned down Saturday in the city's deadliest attack in at least 11 years. Police said it was apparently motivated by drugs or revenge. In a separate attack, a man was stabbed to death Sunday.

Capt. Alfred Travis, the company commander, said the Guard's mission was "still part of Katrina."

"We're in the disaster phase, and I think we may be in the disaster phase for a while, until the neighborhoods are built up again," Travis said.

The National Guard had as many as 15,000 soldiers in the city in the weeks after Katrina. As many as 2,000 stayed until February.

The police force is down to about 1,375 officers, compared with about 1,750 before Katrina.

"I think people are happy they're doing something," said Nathan Chapman, president of a neighborhood organization. "The most important thing is that we fix the problem, not pretend we don't have one."

But Cherie Kerr, who runs a Santa Ana, Calif., public-relations firm that specializes in crisis, said the move gives the impression that crime is out of hand.

"When you call in the National Guard, you're pretty much saying you're out of control," Kerr said.

Noel Scallan, executive assistant at a luxury French Quarter hotel, said calls poured in from people planning to attend a national library convention moments after it was announced that the National Guard would be sent in.

"They got panicky — 'What's going on? Is it OK?'" Scallan said. But there were no cancellations, he said.

But Bill Walker, general manager of a French-style manor on Bourbon Street, called the move "very positive," saying nothing would panic his guests more "than if the crime were to increase."

New Orleans Police Superintendent Warren J. Riley said Monday he had asked in March to have troops sent in this summer, when the population is expected to increase because FEMA assistance to displaced hurricane refugees ends June 30.

Riley insisted his department is capable of controlling crime, saying, "This is not a situation where anything is out of control."



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