

Founder of Grand Rapids Times dies

Special to Sentinel-Voice

MEMPHIS - John "Dear John" Bankston, Sr. died last Wednesday at Methodist North Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., after a brief illness.

He founded Michigan's *Grand Rapids Times* in 1957. A former resident of Grand Rapids, he moved to Richland, Miss., near Jackson, in 1986, soon after selling the newspaper to Yergan (deceased) and Patricia Pulliam.

The second Black Press newspaper founded in the city, *Grand Rapids Times* remains the oldest existing weekly targeted to Black communities in West Michigan.

"Mr. Bankston took a bold step... He published a small magazine, *Faces and Places*, and then used it as a launching pad for a weekly newspaper that flourished into a full-broadsheet," said Patricia Pulliam.

He produced both publications with support from willing friends and his wife, Charline, who he married in 1947.

"He had a beautiful wife who was really



John "Dear John" Bankston Sr. founded Michigan's *Grand Rapids Times* in 1957.

in his corner," said Richard Weatherford, photographer and ad sales representative for *Faces and Places*.

Bankston's magazine highlighted social events of Blacks in Grand Rapids and the entertainment scene in Idlewild, a popular resort town north of Grand Rapids where Black professionals and well-known entertainers gathered from across the U.S.

Weatherford said that Bankston took chances. He did not know much about photography and did not know a lot about writing a magazine. He could get support when he needed it because people liked him.

"John was working at the bus station when he got this idea of doing the magazine. I will never forget it. I was to take pictures, but I ended up selling advertising, too," he added.

Long time friend since 1954, Lawrence "Larry" Taylor, said that John Bankston was very personable.

"He started the paper in fall, 1957. In early 1958, even though I already had a job, I began working with him as advertising coordi-

nator and accountant, without pay. I volunteered because I was his friend."

Grand Rapids Times was known for Bankston's tradition for covering local, statewide and national issues in civil rights, politics, the economy and employment and still gave attention to weddings, parties, and the work of community individuals, organizations and churches. Readers looked forward to seeing whose pictures would show up on the popular "Remember When" page.

By the 1960s, Bankston began publishing *The Muskegon Times*. He became a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association.

He was born November 13, 1913, in Vicksburg, Miss. He moved to Grand Rapids in 1947 from Muskegon, Mich.

Left to cherish his memories are his wife, Charline, and one son, John Bankston Jr. of Detroit, along with a host of nieces and nephews. The funeral service was on Saturday in care of N.J. Ford and Sons Funeral Home in Memphis, Tenn.

'Block the Box': Benefits ex-offenders, communities

By Tiffany Jackson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA) - Curtis Wilbert, vice president of Texas Alliance for the Formerly Incarcerated, says that the recent job fair held at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for ex-offenders was not enough.

As a part of his vision to help ex-offenders find employment, he has formed the "Block the Box" campaign with growing community and national support.

The job fair revealed the ugly truth that has been swept under the rug for many years — that so many ex-offenders across the country are looking for work but can't get hired, constantly excluded for their past transgressions.

In particular, Wilbert says that the "box" on many job and housing rental applications asks about any convictions for crime. This is a part of a bigger national problem — ex-offenders' re-entry to their communities and the blocked access to work and housing — and it must be addressed more aggressively to remove the conditions leading to recidivism.

"I had this vision right after I saw Samuel Scott Jones (the man who said in an interview that he hijacked a truck because he was frustrated over his inability to find adequate employment after his release from prison)," said Wilbert. "I knew then that something needed to be done.

"The safest place for an ex-offender is back in prison," he continued, "At what expense are you (society) willing to pay to get them back there? They have

to re-offend to get back there. If they cannot eat [or find housing] anywhere, it's ludicrous for you to think that they are not going to re-offend," he asserted.

He added, "Ex-offenders don't have a problem with them [employers, landlords] knowing that they are ex-offenders." Wilbert explained that "they just don't want to be blocked before the interview starts."

"We ask that you forgive us for what we have done, but we want to be able to pay our taxes, pay child support and be fathers to our children... we cannot do that if we are not employed," said Wilbert, who says he has first-hand knowledge of what the formerly incarcerated are going through.

"The job fair was just the beginning. It drew thousands of ex-offenders but less than 10 percent of the employers that I asked to show up." Wilbert said 500 new voters were registered and 200 people got jobs.

Wilbert currently works with community programs, teaches life skills, and he has channeled his concern into a 501c(4) organization called X-Factor. He advocates for national changes — legislative, governmental and corporate responsibility.

"I want the city, the state and the county to block the box. We don't have a problem with the background check but we do want to be treated like regular citizens."

Community activist and initiative supporter, Dallas businessman Dwayne Caraway, agrees with blocking the box and agrees that the efforts should go a step further.

"We also have to block

these boxes for those applying for housing as well because they deserve to have a place to stay without having to worry about being denied because of their past convictions," said Caraway. "We still have so many people who are frustrated because they are asking for a second chance and can't get one."

Blocking the box will allow certain eligible ex-offenders — such as those with early-age, non-violent crimes and ex-offenders who have demonstrated responsible

"Ex-offenders don't have a problem with them [employers, landlords] knowing that they are ex-offenders... they just don't want to be blocked before the interview starts."

— Curtis Wilbert, Vice President
Texas Alliance for the Formerly Incarcerated

work ethics in prison — to bypass the part on the job application that asks if the applicant had been convicted of a crime, advocates suggest. Although some people expressed support for the new campaign, others are not sure if many companies will accept it.

"I think that employers have the right to know if the people they plan to hire have committed a felony in the past," said Linda Dukes of GEICO insurance. "We have to know who we are hiring, and if people have been in prison we need to know because they may not be fit for the job. I believe that sometimes what you don't know will in fact harm you."

Wilbert and other advocates see hypocrisy in the corporate sector. There is an

incongruity between low-cost labor that corporations get when prisoners produce products or perform services while incarcerated and what happens to them when seeking jobs after their release.

Wilbert and New Black Panther Party member Olinka Green explain that crime rates are high in Dallas "because many people are out of work." Texas also has the largest prison population in the nation. According to recent FBI statistics, Dallas is number one in crime when

[the companies] refuse to hire them."

Wilbert agrees and said he wants to see some type of credit for work experience given to ex-offenders who might have "worked for years as a welder," making products for a company to sell, but can't show any certificate for those skills — or even be hired by that business or industry once released from prison.

The report also says that Dallas ranks third in the increase of the homeless.

"I want people to also look at things from a woman's perspective because I served seven years in prison for hitting an officer, and when I came out, I had problems finding housing, getting food stamps and finding a job," Olinka said.

There are a few programs available that help ex-offenders, but some question whether they have been beneficial. Wilbert says the "Block the Box" initiative grew from the concerns expressed by some district attorneys in several major cities: There is not enough help to aid ex-offenders once they are released.

Radio host Rickey Smiley of 97.9 "The Beat" said he plans to use his morning show to encourage employers to hire ex-offenders.

"The job fair proved that these people are not just sitting around like the federal government says they are," said Smiley. "About 8,500 people [locally] got out of their bed ready to find work. We are taking calls from employers who have jobs available and who are willing to give people a second chance. We are going to help them

because these people are getting desperate to feed their families."

No funding has been allocated on a state level to help with new programs, but the organizers at the forefront of the Block the Box initiative hope that by including faith-based organizations and other grassroots supporters their campaign will be a success. Wilbert said his program operates from donations from supporters and receives no grant support.

"The box is not right, the box is immoral and the box is not legal," said Pastor Frederick Haynes of Friendship-West Baptist Church. "We need to stop investing so much money in building new prisons and use that money to help create more ways to place these people on jobs."

Realizing it is going to take a concerted effort, Wilbert and supporters say they will bring the issue to the City Council.

"I challenge the Dallas Citizen Council, Dallas Chambers and business associations to stakehold a position on this issue," said Wilbert. "So far, I have not heard from the business community and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that these people [ex-offenders] are not consumers because they do not [yet] have the money to buy. This is why we are encouraging all to get involved to help those willing and ready to be a part of the working community."

For more information or to post job openings, call 817-344-0223.

Tiffany Jackson writes for the Dallas Weekly.

Parker Philpot contributed to this article.