

Farrakhan illness casts concern on Nation

(AP) - Minister Louis Farrakhan, ailing and in seclusion at his Michigan home, has ceded leadership

of the Nation of Islam to an executive board while he recovers, saying the movement must prove that it "is more

than the charisma, eloquence and personality" of one person.

But those who have

watched the Nation evolve over decades believe that the organization — known as much for the dark suits and bow ties of its followers as for its doctrine of Black nationalism — will falter without a dynamic figure like the minister in charge.

"When Farrakhan dies, my prediction is the movement will split," said Lawrence Mamiya, a Vassar College professor and an expert on African-American religion. "I don't think this movement can be governed by a board. It runs off the charismatic energy of one person."

The 73-year-old Farrakhan wrote in a Sept. 11 letter to followers that he was anemic and 20 pounds lighter because of complications from an ulcer in the anal area. He had surgery in 2000 for prostate cancer.

"In this period of testing, you can prove to the world that the Nation of Islam is more than the charisma, eloquence and personality of Louis Farrakhan," he wrote. "You can prove that the Nation of Islam ... is more than the physical presence of any individual, and that it will

live long after I and we have gone."

Conrad Worrill, of the Inner Cities Studies program at Northeastern Illinois University, traveled with Farrakhan to Cuba, where he was diagnosed initially this year. "It's serious, he needs to recover, but he's not on his deathbed," he said.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who spoke with Farrakhan by phone Sept. 24, said the minister had given up oversight "because he wants to devote his time exclusively to physical restitution."

Still, it's clear from Farrakhan's letter that he is concerned about who will succeed him.

He has firsthand experience with a messy transition at the top. He had to rebuild the Nation in the late 1970s, after W.D. Muhammed, the son of the late Nation leader Elijah Muhammad, broke away and moved his followers toward mainstream Islam.

While the Nation has obviously survived, no one can say how successful the revival has been. A longtime target of federal surveillance, the movement is highly secretive and suspicious of out-

siders. At Mosque Maryam in Chicago, the Nation's headquarters, security guards stand watch behind brass-plated doors.

Even researchers who follow the group closely do not know for sure how many members or mosques it has, how much money it takes in or whether it is shrinking or growing.

Yet Farrakhan's popularity among many Blacks is clear. The hundreds of thousands of Black men he drew to the 1995 Million Man March in Washington are only one example. He is popular with hip-hop artists, who praise the Nation in their music, and a trusted mediator in gang conflict. This support is baffling to many outsiders, who remember Farrakhan only for his most provocative comments, including calling Judaism a "gutter religion" and saying Hitler was "wickedly great."

"The Nation of Islam has always been a symbolically important organization as a cultural symbol of defiance against the American state," said Melissa Harris-Lacewell, professor of poli-

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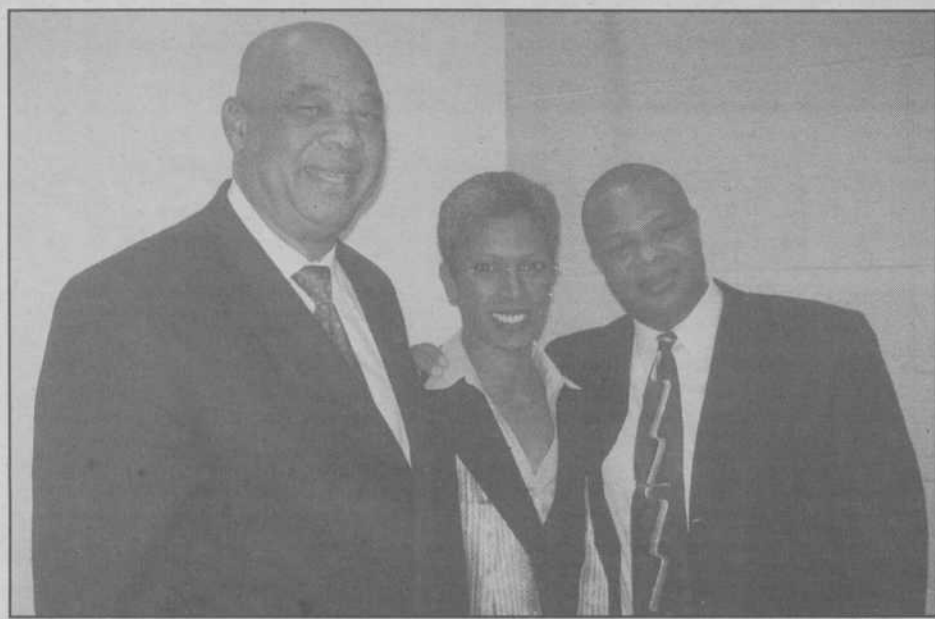


Photo special to the Sentinel-Voice

100 Black Men of Las Vegas members Dr. A. Kenton Williams, left, and president Ted Watkins pose with MGM Mirage executive Punam Mathur at their stakeholders' event.

Luncheon

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are here," Watkins announced.

Education is a huge concern, he said.

"The ratio of Black women and Black men attending college is [two to one]. Worse, only 27 out of 100 Black men will graduate from a university."

He spoke about the high dropout rate coupled with low expectations, "which is why 100 Black Men of Las Vegas is working toward the four goals of both the national and local organization of Mentoring, Education, Health and Wellness and Economic Development."

Using a PowerPoint program, he illustrated the statistics and effects of disparity in treatment of Blacks by the criminal justice and healthcare systems:

Watkins stated, "Thirteen percent of the population in the United States is African-American; 77 percent of all drug users are White, but 91 percent of all drug arrests are Black men. Of those 91 percent, 55 percent of those arrested are between the ages of 18 and 35. [One-third] of the Black men in America are supervised by our court system, either on parole or probation."

He added health statistics on HIV/AIDS: "...Seventy percent of all new reported cases are African-American women. A Black woman has a 25 percent greater chance of contracting HIV or AIDS."

Clark County School District Superintendent Walt Rulffes lauded the accomplishments of 100 Black Men of Las Vegas, including their volunteer work at several local elementary schools.

The mentoring program is the major thrust of the organization and concentrates on academic achievement, positive behavior and social skills.

The organization's Wimberley Initiative is an after school program that provides trained professionals to mentor students to help improve their grades. The Baseball Mentoring Program was created by Marcel Baker, financial secretary, to expose urban children to a team sport other than football and basketball.

Shaundell Newson, vice president of de-

velopment, presented a short video about the organization's student support, providing \$25,000 in scholarships in 2005, running field trips for students to the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum, and hosting the Summer Reading Program, which gained the organization recognition by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education, who visited their mentoring program.

Health and wellness is considered a vital part of a thriving community. The 100 Black Men of Las Vegas teams with several nonprofit organizations to promote preventive health programs, deliver health screenings and provide education on diseases plaguing African-Americans.

The national organization's economic development programs focus on three primary areas: financial literacy, family wealth building and entrepreneurship. The local chapter is currently developing these types of programs for the community through partnerships.

Many of the organization's sponsors and community partners were recognized at the event, including MGM/Mirage, Harrah's Entertainment, Cox Communication, State Farm Insurance, Las Vegas Urban Chamber of Commerce, Culinary Union and Clark County School District.


Al G. Gourrier, President of First Commerce Bank, was applauded as the first African-American bank president in Nevada. At 34, he is also one of the youngest. Gourrier praised the organization, saying, "It is because of mentoring programs like this one that I am here today. I am thrilled to continue this tradition."

Watkins introduced President-elect Dr. A. Kenton Williams, who with visible emotion said, "Thank you for allowing me to continue a great legacy. I look forward to this life experience and continuing in this role and the great work of this organization."

The organization's annual holiday gala will be held on Saturday, December 9, at the Paris Hotel and Casino. For more information, contact 702-391-5500 or www.100blackmenoflasvegas.com.


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