

Racial coalition urged on immigration

By James Wright
Special to Sentinel-Voice
 WASHINGTON (NNPA) - A coalition of Blacks and Latinos is necessary to effect changes in immigration laws, a nationwide advocacy group has determined.

FIRM, the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, which operates under the umbrella of the Center for Community Change, recently held a summit on the campus of Gallaudet University to discuss strategies on how to bring together the two largest minority groups to create fair, comprehensive immigration reform policy.

There were workshops, speakers and visits to members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

In a letter to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said their organization's platform is to:

- Create legislation that does not discriminate among undocumented immigrants based on the length of time in the United States.
- Eliminate the backlogs in the family immigration system and facilitate family reunification.
- Provide job training resources for all low-wage workers.

— Create clear separation of authority between federal and local law enforcement in immigration matters.

— Create visa programs with strong worker protection provisions.

— Make labor laws immigrant friendly.

— Protect civil rights of immigrants, whether [status is] legal or not.

Latinos surpassed Blacks as the largest minority group in 2003.

Despite both groups facing racial challenges in employment, education, building wealth and health disparities, the groups have not worked together because of misconceptions about one another.

"There is a perception among Blacks that Latinos and other immigrants are coming to this country to take our jobs and to be White," Alan Jenkins, executive director of Opportunity Agenda, said.

"There is a perception among Latinos and other immigrants groups that Blacks are lazy and criminal. It does not help that the mainstream media seems to be trying to drive a wedge between Blacks and Latinos.

"We need to tell a coherent message."

"The way to fix the problem is making the job ladder better for Blacks and Browns. We can make the bad jobs into good jobs by organizing."

— Dushaw Hockett, a leader with FIRM

Jenkins was a participant in a workshop titled, "Alliance Building: A Conversation with African-American Leaders" with Hilary Shelton, bureau chief of the NAACP's Washington office; the Rev. Graylon Hagler, and John Flateau, a professor at Medgar Evers College.

Shelton said Blacks and Browns face "common challenges and a shared vision."

He noted that it was the work of the NAACP along with Latino, Asian-American and Native-American organizations that helped the Voting Rights Act get its recent 25-year renewal.

A key to getting Blacks and Latinos to working together on immigration reform is the groups getting to know each other, said Dushaw Hockett, a leader with FIRM. Hockett led a workshop, "Immigration and

Race: Black, Brown and Beyond," which had standing-room only.

The room was filled with Black, White, Latino and Asian community organizers from all over the country.

"Blacks and Browns have a mutual history of oppression and racism in this country," he said. "History can be a tool for alliance building."

Hockett said that the "workplace is serving as a place of tension but can serve as a place of opportunity" for people to get to know each other. He made it clear that the common perception among Americans, particularly some Blacks, that immigrants are taking jobs from citizens is inaccurate.

"There are two types of jobs — there are the good

jobs, which are unionized, skilled, have decent wages, good working conditions and good benefits," Hockett said.

"Then there are the bad jobs, which are the opposite of the good jobs. Blacks and Browns are crowding the bad jobs because of lack of education, racism, language issues and legal status.

"The way to fix the problem is making the job ladder better for Blacks and Browns. We can make the bad jobs into good jobs by organizing."

Hockett said that creating a dialogue between Blacks and Browns will not be easy.

"It is messy, it is slow," he said. "There are some strong feelings on both sides. We have to clear up the inaccurate stereotypes about the groups and coming together as one on this issue of immigration."

Hockett said that it is critical for Blacks and Browns to come together because of the changing demographics of the country. The U.S. Census Bureau has reported that by 2050, the population of the United States will be 50.5 percent people of color, a first

since the census was taken in 1790.

"We really need to learn how to relate to each other because we are in this country together," Hockett said.

In his keynote address to the members of FIRM, Dr. James Lawson said that the people have it within their power to change immigration policy. Lawson is a civil rights leader and a lieutenant to Dr. Martin Luther King in the 1960s.

"We must tell our representatives on Capitol Hill that business as usual will not suffice," Lawson said. "The solution to the immigration problem is simple, and we can persuade the American people if we can convince them that this is in the best interest of their children."

Lawson also said that the unpopular war in Iraq will ignite a new mood of activism in the country.

"People in the 21st century are going to rise and pale in numbers compared to the movements of the 60s," he said. "People want to make a change in America, and immigration reform may start this process."

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one just like that, and they get another hit. But writers, we have to keep pushing that envelop. You have to learn something; you have to learn to listen, you have to keep pushing yourself to the edge a little bit."

"Learning, listening and pushing" describes Giovanni's life of surviving more than a decade past a lung cancer diagnosis.

She wrote the introduction to "Breaking the Silence: Inspirational Stories of Black Cancer Survivors" by Karin Stanford (Hilton Publishing, 2005), and she's in the process of writing a "slow and painful book" about the impact of cancer in her life:

"My mother and my sister both died of lung cancer. But you don't fight cancer — you have to find a way to live with it... That's what I feel about my cancer, that it and I have made a deal that we're going to live together a little bit longer. It's been 12 years, and I'd love another 20 or 25. There's no reason for it to kill me, and I'm not trying to kill it; I'm just trying to stay alive."

Giovanni also credits her ability to "tune out" doom-saying from healthcare providers "because you don't need anybody telling you why you really are sick and why you're going to die."

She recalled when she "fired" one of her oncologists: "...He was looking at my x-rays and he said, 'Well, you know, according to this, you'll be dead by June!' And I said 'Am I paying you, or are you a volunteer?' He said 'No, you're paying me.' I said, 'Then you're fired. I don't need this.' And I went and got a

second and a third opinion. You have to do things like that, because as a friend of mine who is a nun says — she's wonderful — 'That's a call that you have to answer'... The Lord dials your number, you're going, but you want to make sure that that's what is happening, not that you have some incompetent or some indifferent person killing you!"

People must be assertive when it comes to their health, Giovanni insists: "...You've got to take care of yourself. Any time you're feeling like something's wrong, something is. Go see about it. Don't wait... The first time I went to see the doctor, because I knew something was wrong, he said, 'Oh no, it's not.' Well, I couldn't accept that; I knew something was wrong, so I had to go find somebody who that's going to find out what's wrong... And so when people say, 'Well, I don't see anything; maybe you got a little high blood pressure or something,' you can't accept that — that'll kill you!"

"You knew something was wrong; you've been dreaming something was wrong. In my case, my father started to appear in my bathroom; when I was brushing my teeth, he would be in the mirror. And I kept thinking, 'Why am I seeing my father?' He's been dead — and he died of an intestinal cancer — and he wasn't talking to me. It's just, it bothered me... But I said, 'Something's wrong. Why is he in my mirror?' And I still don't understand that. But it's a lot of stuff. And I don't fight it."

Stephani-Maari Booker writes for the Minnesota Spokesman-Review.

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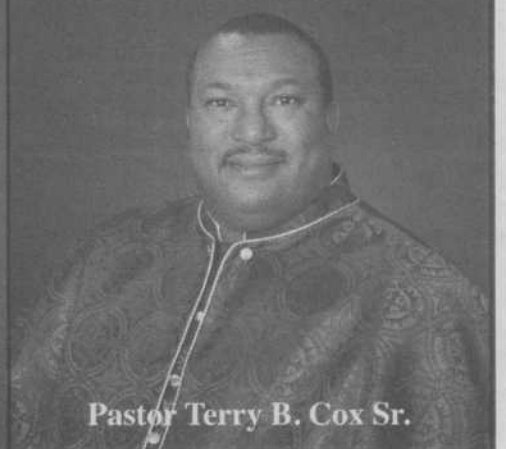
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