

Johnson taking aim at health of Black groups

Special to Sentinel-Voice

TOLEDO, Ohio (NNPA) — At a conference focused on African-American health and statistical health disparities, BET Rap City host Jeff Johnson, the keynote speaker, questioned the health of African-American institutions and organizations, including that of his host.

Johnson, a University of Toledo graduate who has become a popular host of the rap video show as well as other shows, an essayist, reporter and political activist, addressed the 2008 Ohio Urban League Young Professionals Conference Oct. 25.

Whether he lit a fire under the conference participants remains to be seen, but Johnson held nothing back in trying to do so.

"When was the last time you took your organization to the doctor?" he said near the end of his address. "Because as we challenge ourselves to go forward, is the Urban League healthy? Are the Young Professionals fit? As we leave this place, I would ask you, what area of health do you need to get treated for? Do you need to trim the fat? Or do you need something to create mental stability?"

"I don't care if you like my speech," he said. "I'm not here to entertain. But I hope that I've said one thing that will make you think about something different or willing to do something different tomorrow."

"It's not about if the [banquet] food was good or if we liked the presenters, it's about what will we do?"

John C. Jones, president and CEO of the host Greater Toledo Urban League, took no offense at the blunt remarks and in fact embraced the sentiments of the keynoter, whom he has known for many years.

"He's left a challenge at the table for each of us as to what we're going to do from today," Jones told the banquet guests. "We can walk out of here and do the same old stuff we've been doing. Or we can walk out of here and be a part of the change that we need to see."

The two-day conference was themed "Bridging the Gap in Health and Healthcare" and presenters held workshops on a variety of topics related to African-Americans.

But the workshops were poorly attended. Only three men sat in for the "Brother to Brother: Health Discussion for Men Only" workshop held by Fred Wright, the president and CEO of the Lorain County Urban League.

The conference was expected to attract several hundred Young Professionals from Ohio's major cities, but only about 60 people — including conference sponsors, politicians and GTUL employees — were at the banquet.

A day earlier, the first plenary session was canceled because scheduled speakers didn't show up. It was entitled "Your Values, Your

Voice, Your Vote," and was supposed to focus on government policy regarding healthcare.

State Sen. Ray Miller was to have been among the speakers.

Johnson didn't hesitate to point out the empty tables in the banquet room or contend that absent Young Professionals chose not to drive from Cleveland, Columbus or other cities because they either didn't care and/or objected to having to pay a hotel registration fee.

"If we're going to be honest about moving to create legitimate change in healthcare, we've got to deal with the health of the movement that has to be engaged in creating the change," he said. "I think it's amusing when we throw out these clarion calls to come and collectively engage in strategy and discussion and mobilization and people really aren't interested."

"This is a state meeting. But most of the people here are from Toledo... I don't care about how many people didn't come to this. What I care about is what are the people who are here going to do with the information they have been given?"

The conference included sessions on healthy lifestyles, exercise programs for busy young professionals, health insurance, holistic health, "work/life balance," childhood obesity, careers in the healthcare industry, HIV/AIDS in the Black community, and on "Brother to Brother" and "Sister to Sister" issues.

Wright, the Lorain Urban League president, talked about his affiliate's "Save Our Sons" pilot program that currently involves 42 men age 18 or older. Most lacked health insurance and hadn't been to a physician in years.

"Their doctor is the emergency room," Wright said. "They only come in when there's some dire straits."

He said men, generally, and African-American men, in particular, ignore their health, distrust the medical system and fear finding out something's wrong. There's also a misplaced macho factor, he said.

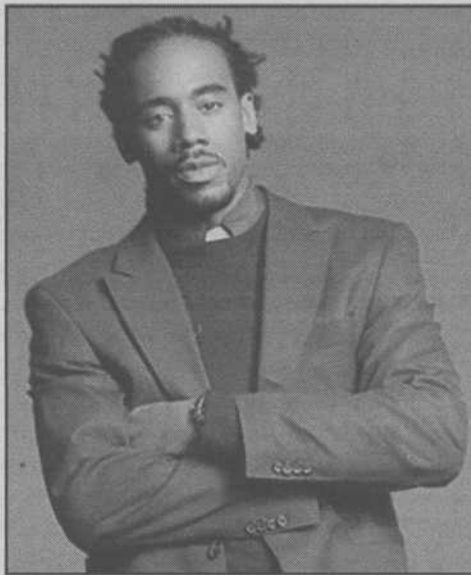
"If they go to the doctor, they feel like a wimp or something. We've got to change that around," Wright said.

Cost is another factor, he said. Most of the 42 men in his pilot project were either unemployed or underemployed.

"Those who think we don't need universal healthcare, I beg to differ," he said. "If 47 million people don't have healthcare, we've got to come up with some kind of system. ...It has worked in other countries."

Lucas County Commissioner Ben Konop, on hand to present proclamations to Jones and Johnson, made note of the health insurance issue. He said he hopes the presidential election will bring about a change in how

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Jeff Johnson

Unionizing allegedly costs Perry's writers

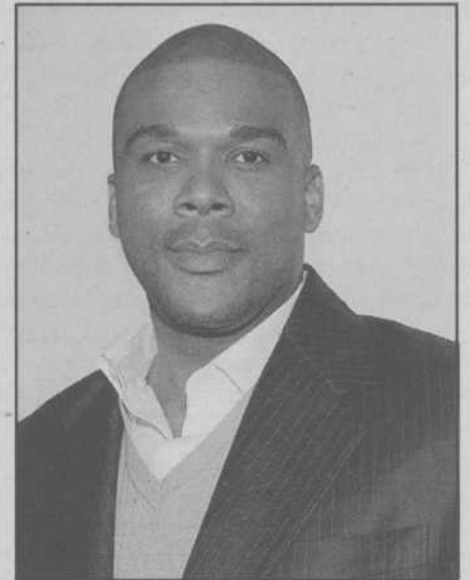
*By Kimberly C. Roberts
Special to Sentinel-Voice*

PHILADELPHIA (NNPA) — Days before opening his new production studio in Atlanta, Ga., writer/director/producer Tyler Perry fired four of his television writers, among them, Yeadon, Pa. native Lamont Ferrell.

Ferrell, a former Temple University student who competed on the school's basketball team — along with fellow screenwriters Kellie Griffin, Christopher Moore and Teri Brown-Jackson — was allegedly dismissed for being involved with a Writers Guild of America organizing effort. All were award-winning writers for Perry's TBS sitcom "House of Payne."

"I'm a member of the WGA," said Ferrell, a veteran writer who has crafted screenplays for shows such as "Girlfriends," "Moesha" and "The Parenthood," — all WGA programs. "Tyler's show is a non-union show, meaning we're not a member of the Writer's Guild. I took the job basically knowing that, but there was some discussion that they could possibly go union."

"So over the last couple of years, we were talking about that, and asking Tyler if we could go union, because he didn't offer any health benefits, pension, dental or union wages. So we're making less than



TYLER PERRY

typical writers would make on a cable sitcom."

The company says the writers were fired for just cause, but the union said last Thursday that they were dismissed because they were involved in the organizing effort.

The WGA claims that the problems began in April when Ferrell, Griffin, Moore and Brown-Jackson were among seven writers seeking to negotiate a first WGA

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