

## CHAPTER 3

# Detroit NAACP

I boarded a train from the Deep South to Detroit. We stopped in Cincinnati, which falls on the Mason-Dixon Line, where trains headed north were no longer segregated, in theory if not in practice. Except for the summer I worked on the tobacco farm in New England, I had not spent time in the North, so I was not sure what to expect about the practices of racism and segregation in Detroit. I only knew that it would be my job to fight against them.

I came to Detroit alone. I had no relatives or friends here. When I arrived in the city on July 2, 1950, I was twenty-four years old. My starting salary to lead the Detroit NAACP was \$3,000 a year. The minimum wage in 1950 was 75 cents an hour. I knew that I would be working long hours for much less than minimum wage, but money did not concern me. I was resolute and idealistic, and excited by the challenge. To be an effective leader of the Detroit branch, I would have to build strong and trusting relationships in the community. I was confident I could do so and that I would learn as I went along.

I arrived at the Michigan Central Depot, a couple of miles from downtown. My first memory of Detroit was of watching a black woman working as a porter struggling with a large suitcase. The image caught my attention because it deviated from the traditional gender roles in the South. My grandmother or mother would have not thought of a porter's job as women's work. Three black women who were on the Detroit NAACP board picked me up at the depot. They drove me to the black YMCA downtown. I stayed in a room there for two months while I searched for better accommodations that I could afford. Eventually, I rented a room in the home of the Scott family in Virginia Park, a black neighborhood on the city's west side.

The office of the Detroit NAACP was on the second floor of a two-story building at St. Antoine and Vernor, at the edge of a vibrant black commercial and entertainment district called “Black Bottom” or “Paradise Valley.” A small room in our office suite was subleased to the Eastside Merchants Association, an organization of Jewish merchants committed to building good relations between the Jewish merchants and the African American community. The organization was led by Samuel J. Lieberman. Many times, I asked the organization to pay its rent in advance to help us meet our financial responsibilities, and the Eastside Merchants Association always obliged.

The Detroit branch of the NAACP had about 5,000 members when I arrived in 1950. Detroit’s membership total made it the largest branch in the nation, as it had been since the NAACP started local branches in 1912. The Detroit branch was also the only one with an executive secretary, which was the top executive position in the organization. Gloster B. Current was the first, followed by Edward M. Swan. I was the third. Both Current and Swan had strong reputations and deep ties in the Detroit civil rights community, even before becoming executive secretary. I did not, but I think I was offered the job for several reasons. I had some NAACP leadership experience and a degree from Morehouse, which was already known as an intellectual cradle of civil rights activism. Second, I was willing to work for a very modest salary. And finally, some on the board may have felt that my youth disposed me to be more compliant to their interests. Even though we all shared the same mission, as in any organization, there were egos and politics behind the scenes. It would not be long before some of these political conflicts would come to a head.

In 1950, Detroit was the fourth-largest city in the nation. More than 1.8 million people lived in the city, the highest population the city would ever have. Eighty-four percent of the residents were white. Detroit was the epicenter of the Great Migration from the South, drawing both whites and blacks to the promise of good-paying jobs related to the auto industry. Detroit was also the birthplace of the burgeoning American middle class. The rate of home ownership in

Detroit was higher than in any other city in the country. The economic vitality of the city was a major reason why it boasted the largest NAACP branch.

The branch was also regarded as one of the most active and important in the nation, and again, much of this was related to economics. Generally speaking, in the history of the civil rights movement, the blacks who were most involved were self-employed professionals who made their living from a black clientele and, therefore, whose livelihood could not be directly threatened by white opponents of the struggle. These professionals included ministers, doctors, lawyers, and undertakers. Black doctors and lawyers were restricted in their practices by a system of discrimination that prevented them from having white clients and institutional access. A large cadre of activist black professionals evolved in Detroit because they served a black community that economically benefited from the robust manufacturing sector. As a result, the city was one of the most important centers of African American life in the nation. Still, of the 300,000 blacks in Detroit in 1950, only a tiny percent were members of the NAACP, and I knew that we had to increase our presence in the community if we were to address the problems of segregation, discrimination, and police brutality. These problems were in many ways quite similar to those in the Deep South. The principal difference was the heightened component of violence in the South used to enforce Jim Crow.

Our branch office had a staff of two: my secretary, Barbara Helms, and myself. We were strapped for money and needed to increase our membership to keep the office going. A young man, Samuel Simmons, frequently volunteered to help in the office and was eventually hired as my assistant. Samuel taught me to drive, since I had never had the opportunity or necessity to learn before. I then bought a used car and was able to get around the Motor City by myself. This was no small matter. It enhanced my efforts both to raise our membership and to do hands-on civil rights work in the community.

My membership campaign focused on the black churches. The church was crucial not only because it was the most powerful

institution in the black community but because it did not have to answer to the white-controlled power structure. In this respect, the system of racial segregation created an opportunity to develop black institutions that could challenge the system. Ministers invited me to speak to their congregations about the NAACP's work. I tried to encourage the worshippers to subscribe to our \$2 annual membership fee, half of which we sent to the national office. It was not an easy sell, and I was disappointed that the black community did not do more to support us. The community understood that the NAACP was the strongest organization of its kind and was out front fighting systemic racism and segregation. However, it was difficult to raise consistent funds for the long-term struggle.

I chose Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church to be my place of worship. Tabernacle was located on the west side and attracted many of the leading black civil rights activists in the city. At Tabernacle, I got to know a young lawyer named Damon Keith. He was born on the west side and was determined to establish a law practice in the city that would fight racial injustice. Damon and I soon became best friends, and this friendship would become one of the most significant relationships of my life. Damon was very active in the NAACP and took the lead in some of our most important initiatives. We both understood the value of mentorship, and we cultivated an inner circle of older and wiser friends who advised us on strategy and tactics.

Our chief advisor was Joe Coles, who worked as a field investigator for the Mayor's Interracial Committee. Joe counseled us about how to work within the system and still be faithful to our cause and ideals. He always emphasized that strategy must be a vital part of courageous action. We must outthink an enemy that believed it was inherently smarter than we were. In our discussions, we would bring forth and debate different plans for winning the battles we faced against the white power structure. We would also discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various black leaders in town and how to deal with conflicts of interest and personality. Joe did not hesitate to criticize

Damon's and my actions and intentions. We listened without objection and sought to better ourselves for a cause much greater than ourselves.

Damon and I were amenable to advice, but we were also strong-willed, and sometimes our stubbornness would get the best of us. In the early years of our friendship we would occasionally get angry and not speak to each other for two or three weeks at a time. Fortunately, we soon outgrew this immature behavior and came to count on our friendship as an inspirational constant throughout the struggles, triumphs, and life changes that nearly sixty years of being together in the same city would bring.

One of the first issues I pursued in Detroit was housing segregation. The Detroit NAACP had achieved a historic legal victory in this area before my arrival. In 1948, the branch took up the cause of a black couple, Orsel and Minnie McGhee, who were prevented from buying a home in an all-white west-side neighborhood because of racially restrictive covenants. These covenants were specifically written into real estate deeds and proclaimed that only whites could purchase and occupy the properties. Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, and Asians were effectively excluded from neighborhoods that sought to permanently maintain their lily-white status. The Detroit NAACP took the McGhee case all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where it was combined with two other restrictive covenant cases that the Court agreed to hear. The lead case was *Shelley v. Kraemer*, out of St. Louis, Missouri. Thurgood Marshall argued the case for the NAACP before the Court, which then declared racial covenants unconstitutional. On paper, it was a victory against housing segregation; in practice, however, things were entirely different. Authorities in Detroit refused to enforce the Supreme Court decision. Detroit newspapers wrote detailed articles instructing and encouraging white homeowners to circumvent the law and keep blacks out. This was indicative of how the mainstream media in Detroit was but an extension of the white institutional power structure. This structure had one principal goal: to maintain the social, economic, and political advantages



Meeting on the *Sipes v. McGhee* restrictive covenants case. *Left to right:* Edward Turner, president of branch; Attorney Francis Dent; Attorney Constance Baker Motley of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund; Attorney Willis M. Graves; myself. Detroit, 1952.

of the white population by restricting the rights and opportunities of black people.

Race and neighborhood purity were the fundamental political issues in Detroit. The campaigns for mayor and common council centered on white fear of black progress. Albert Cobo took office in 1950, the year I arrived, for the first of his two elected four-year terms as mayor. Cobo was a racist. His supporters expected him to stand firm against the equality and encroachment of blacks. Cobo made it clear that the city's official policy was segregation in public housing. Blacks would not be permitted to live in public housing units in

white neighborhoods, even though federal funds were used to build the units and federal law prohibited discrimination. The NAACP took the lead in fighting the Cobo administration's racist policies. We sued the Detroit Housing Commission in federal court and eventually won a favorable decision. Our guiding strategy in fighting issues of discrimination was to illuminate the law in order to fight an unjust system. Victories in court strengthened our cause, but the system was still recalcitrant. Even after the court ruled that public housing must be integrated, the Cobo administration enforced segregation in existing units and cancelled the construction of other buildings.

The housing crisis for blacks was acute and getting worse. The black population in the city was growing, but blacks were confined to live in particular areas, and black neighborhoods were specifically targeted for "urban renewal"—or, as we referred to it, "urban removal." With the full encouragement and financial support of the federal government, new highways were planned that necessitated the destruction of black districts. Paradise Valley, the commercial and cultural heart of black Detroit, was to be leveled to create Interstate 75. Blacks had no choice but to crowd into already overcrowded neighborhoods where landlords took advantage of demand by charging extortionate rents for substandard housing.

The discrepancy between housing availability for whites and blacks was staggering. From 1945 to 1955, about 100,000 private housing units were built on vacant land in the city, but only 2 percent of those units were available to nonwhite residents, even though, in 1955, almost a quarter of the city's population was black. Blacks had a greater need for public housing but had less access to these subsidized units. The waiting list for blacks was more than 6,000 names long, whereas there was virtually no waiting list for whites. On the housing issue alone, the pressure and frustration in the black community was mounting.

Black families who moved into white neighborhoods often faced violence and intimidation from the residents. When problems arose, the police, other authorities, and the newspapers looked the other way,

so families would often call the NAACP for help. There were hundreds of racial incidents in the 1950s and early 1960s involving blacks brave enough to integrate an area. These blacks experienced prolonged harassment, broken windows, and, in extreme cases, bodily harm and arson. In one typical incident, a young black woman named Pedie and her mother moved into a white neighborhood on the west side. On their first evening in the house, about thirty-five white demonstrators gathered outside and repeatedly shouted, "Nigger go home." Pedie called me and I went to her house. As I walked to her door, the angry mob cursed and threatened me. I did not react or show any outward signs of fear. Once inside, I sat with the women for about three hours as we waited for the demonstration to subside. There was little else I could do but let them know that they were not alone. I called the police and they took the position that they could not disperse the crowd or offer protection to the women. Later I went down to the local precinct and spoke to the sergeant in charge. I told him that I would not accept the police excuse that white residents had the right to demonstrate in front of the woman's home and attempt to intimidate her into moving away. I wanted the authorities to know that they were on notice and that the NAACP would be watching and documenting the situation. Again, we knew that the law on the books was on our side, and our goal was to get law enforcement to act according to the law. I continued to check on Pedie and her mother. Eventually, the racist demonstrations and abuse ended when it became evident that the women would not be forced out of their home.

Blacks seeking a home in a white neighborhood also had to overcome the redlining and discrimination practices of the banks. In the fall of 1963, a young black woman came to my office and asked the NAACP to do something about First Federal Savings and Loan, the largest home-loan bank in the city. The woman said that she had been denied a mortgage for \$13,000 even though she had \$8,000 in savings at the bank and was eminently qualified for the loan. The only possible reason for her rejection was her race and the fact that the home was in a white area.

In addition to its discriminatory lending practices, First Federal had a policy of not hiring blacks for jobs that represented the company to the public. Of the bank's 340 employees, only twelve were black, and all of them worked as porters or janitors. The bank had been in the city for almost three decades and had never hired a black teller or clerk. We tried to negotiate directly with First Federal to change its policies, but the negotiations failed. The NAACP formed a discrimination action committee, and we decided to picket and stage sit-ins. We started picketing in October. The bank's tactic was to wait us out and hope that our will would be broken by the winter cold.

Led by our committee chair Abe Ulmer, we picketed for five months, but it was the sit-ins that ultimately forced the bank to come to terms with our demands. A group of us, including Abe's wife Trudy, would enter First Federal, sit down in the service line, and decline to move. The bank would call the police, and we would force the police to remove us physically since we refused to get up and walk. Our resistance was always peaceful, but the commotion inside and outside First Federal disrupted business and embarrassed the bank in the community. The sit-ins took a toll on us, both physically and financially, since we had to endure the arrests and defend ourselves in court. But we were determined to keep up the campaign for as long as it took. Finally, the bank called in a mediator named Ron Haughton. We reached a settlement in which First Federal pledged to change its discriminatory practices. The bank agreed to hire and train blacks as tellers and other financial jobs. The bank also agreed to end its pattern of racial bias against blacks seeking loans or mortgages.

Another issue we took on was the discrimination against blacks at restaurants, bars, and hotels. The eating and entertainment venues downtown and along Woodward Avenue, the main commercial thoroughfare in the city, refused to serve blacks. A few months after I arrived in Detroit, we set up a restaurant discrimination committee. The chair of the committee was Ernest Dillard. His wife, Jessie, also participated. We met every Friday at 6 p.m. at the black YMCA downtown. We would select the target of our sit-in demonstration

for the evening and plot our strategy. The use of sit-ins as a protest tool was experimental, and our committee was one of the first in the country to try this tactic.

The law prohibited restaurants from racially discriminating, but restaurants in the city openly flouted the law. We entered the restaurant we chose and would wait to be served. Inevitably, an hour would go by without a waiter or any restaurant employee offering a menu or any service whatsoever. Then, one of us would get up and ask for the manager or *maitre d'*. We would politely explain to the person in charge that we had been waiting patiently for an hour and that no one has come by to take our order. Invariably, the person would respond that the restaurant was “unable to serve us.” We would ask for a more detailed explanation, but in most cases, the person would simply reiterate the pat company line. Sometimes the person would ask what we wanted to order, and whatever we said would be met with, “Sorry, we don’t have that,” even though we could see other customers eating the same meals we requested. Our sit-ins caused a measure of tension among the white patrons in the establishment, although there was not a single occasion in all our protests when a patron took our side. The tension was part of our strategy. We wanted to be an embarrassment to the facility.

After the restaurant made it clear that we would not be served, we would leave and use a pay phone outside to call the police and ask that they come right away. What we said to the police on the phone depended on the venue. For example, after our sit-in at the Stage Door Bar, an upscale cocktail lounge on Woodward Avenue, we told the dispatcher that a fight was about to break out at the place. When the police arrived to speak to the management, we explained that the bar was in violation of the law because it refused to serve us. The manager then claimed that he denied us service because we had come to the bar intoxicated and must have had too much to drink at another establishment. We, of course, had not consumed any alcohol. But the manager knew that the law permits bars to refuse to serve customers who, in their own judgment, are drunk. And we knew,

going into this protest, that the bar would likely use this excuse to cover its illegal actions. The senior officer at the scene knew it was an excuse, but instead of confronting the manager, he asked us why we wanted to stay when it was evident that we were not wanted. I then politely argued with the officer that it was our right to be served and we wanted the law to be enforced. The officer refused to act, but we had made our point. All of the discussions among the Stage Door management, the police, and ourselves took place in open view of the patrons and disrupted the normal activity at the establishment. It was the only way we could draw attention to the problem and fight this pattern of discrimination.

The restaurant discrimination committee met almost every week for a number of years. As a result, we visited almost every eating and entertainment venue in the city that practiced racial discrimination. We protested many establishments several times. We staged sit-ins at the Arcadia rink, which refused to admit blacks wanting to skate. We sat at the counter at the famous Brown Derby restaurant and asked for cups of coffee. The owner said he didn't have any coffee even though there was a big pot brewing in front of us. So we continued to sit and wait. Eventually, the owner decided to close the place early for the night and lose business rather than serve us. On a number of occasions, restaurant and bar owners took the extreme measure of shutting down for the night rather than dealing with us or the police, even though we all understood that the police would not make the owners abide by the law. The establishments did not want to cope with unwanted attention and agitation.

After nearly two years of protests, some of the major eateries in the city finally began to serve black customers. Meanwhile, the NAACP continued to pressure the major hotels in Detroit about their illegal discrimination practices. These hotels refused to rent their social facilities to blacks for private parties, meetings, and other events. Blacks were also customarily denied the opportunity to rent a room for an overnight stay. We made it clear to the hotels that we would consider legal action if they did not change their policies to comply

with the law. Finally, in 1953, the Book-Cadillac Hotel downtown allowed two major black fraternities to hold their respective national conclaves at the hotel. Though it was still a struggle, other hotels eventually followed suit.

Racial discrimination forced blacks in Detroit, as in all major cities, to develop their own commercial district featuring small businesses, restaurants, bars, and entertainment places. Paradise Valley was only a few square miles in area, but it was a city within the city, a teeming convergence of entrepreneurial, cultural, and residential activity. I spent many evenings in Paradise Valley enjoying the pulsating energy of Hastings Street and its arteries. Renowned black musicians and entertainers performed in the Valley's clubs and theaters—names like Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Billie Holliday, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Sam Cooke, and Dick Gregory. Indeed, the Valley was a necessary stop for all the great black entertainers of the time. These entertainers and other black celebrities would stay at the Gotham Hotel, which was renowned for its world-class elegance and was the social center and crown jewel of the black community. The lobby was decorated with original paintings of prominent African American leaders in Detroit. In each of the hotel's 200 rooms was a copy of Langston Hughes's *Simple Speaks His Mind*. The Gotham was owned by the black businessman John J. White. It was well known in the black community that White ran a lucrative numbers ring and used some of the proceeds to embellish his hotel. One day in 1952, White walked into my office at the edge of the Valley. He complimented me on the civil rights work the branch was doing and said that he had heard that we were struggling financially. He handed me \$1,000 to help meet our operating expenses and said that more would be forthcoming.

A decade later, John White was arrested on gambling charges. The Gotham Hotel was vacant and would soon be leveled, just like the rest of Paradise Valley. The urban renewal program that began under Cobo in 1950 continued under successive white administrations, gradually and irrevocably destroying the heart of the black business

community. Black citizens and leadership had no say in the urban renewal program, and the white power structure did not hesitate to sacrifice black neighborhoods for the sake of highways designed to decentralize the city and facilitate suburbanization. In retrospect, I wish that we had fought sooner and more vigorously on the issue. By the time the black community was organized in opposition to the program, it was too late to stop its momentum. In our efforts to achieve integration, we ceded, unwisely, much of what African Americans had already built. We wanted integration to succeed so badly that we neglected to provide staunch support to centers of black enterprise.

The destruction of the Valley devastated black entrepreneurship in the city, and the consequences would resonate long after white flight was virtually complete. The writing was already on the wall in 1950 that the white populace wanted to leave the city rather than interact with blacks in neighborhoods, workplaces, parks, and restaurants. Moreover, those who fled had little regard for the kind of city they left behind. In the next fifty years, the city's overall population would fall by half, and its racial makeup would be reversed. Black leaders in the 1950s and 1960s struggled to desegregate the city and its institutions. Meanwhile, whites were abandoning the city in droves, eventually making Detroit the most segregated metropolitan area in the nation and undercutting our hard-fought victories for social justice.

As soon as it took office, the Cobo administration began to recast city commissions to promote its agenda of segregation. It forced out the only black member of the Housing Commission and gutted the Mayor's Interracial Committee, causing the resignation of some members, including Edward Turner, president of the Detroit NAACP board. The Interracial Committee was created after the city's race riot in 1943. Thirty-four people died in the two days of rioting; twenty-five of them were black. The white police force shot and killed seventeen people, all of them black.<sup>3</sup> The Interracial

3. Vivian M. Baulch and Patricia Zacharias, "The 1943 Detroit Race Riots," *Detroit News*, <http://info.detnews.com/history/story/index.cfm?id=185&category=events>.

Committee was chartered to study the racial issues that triggered the riot and to make constructive recommendations. The Cobo administration did not want an advisory group that conflicted with its agenda, but it still needed a prominent black leader to serve on the Interracial Committee in order to justify the committee's name. Cobo wanted to appoint Edward Davis to the committee. Davis was the first African American in the country to own an auto dealership. He was well regarded in the black community, and he responded to criticism about his pending appointment by saying that he felt could make a difference on the committee. As the leader of the NAACP, I wanted to state our official position on this controversy. Damon Keith and I met with our friend Joe Coles to discuss a course of action. We were of the same mind: the NAACP must take a strong stand against any black leaders who allowed themselves to be exploited by the mayor's office. Coles warned me that I would likely pay a price for my forthcoming outspokenness. I issued a statement to the Detroit newspapers that read: "No self-respecting Negro citizen can accept assignment to any city commission by Mayor Cobo." The statement became front-page news.

My comments created their own controversy. Some people thought they were too harsh toward Ed Davis and that they could be perceived as an insult to the chair of the Interracial Committee, Father John E. Coogan, a white liberal Catholic priest. Others understood the comments as necessary defiance against the conspicuous racism of the Cobo government. I knew that my actions were in the tradition of my mentors in the civil rights movement. When a situation arises, I was taught, you must strategize around your core principles and then act quickly before the dynamics of the situation change and an opportunity has slipped away. There are opportunities for agitation that build enthusiasm in the movement by reminding people of the struggle's resolute conscience. And so there was no doubt in my mind that I had done the right thing. Nevertheless, I was called in front of the Detroit NAACP board to explain my comments and defend my job as executive secretary.

It was early in my tenure, but I knew that the outcome of this board meeting would determine the tenor and limits of my leadership for a long time. My critics on the board accused me of being too aggressive in confronting the enemy, acting too often on my own, and exceeding the scope of an executive secretary's responsibilities. The president of the board, Ed Turner, defended me. Then, some friends who were active and important members of the branch spoke on my behalf. They included Damon, Horace White, and Joe Coles. Joe went to war for me. He told the board that I was a purposeful young man who had a long way to go and who must be allowed to express himself to stimulate constructive tension in the community. In addition, Joe argued that the board should not criticize and discourage me because the difficult work of civil rights activism required passion, initiative, and self-confidence. Ultimately, Joe's argument prevailed, and the experience invigorated my determination and sense of freedom to pursue the issues on which our office had to be out front.

The major hospitals in Detroit discriminated against black doctors and practiced segregation in the placement of black patients. The hospitals did not permit a black patient to share a semiprivate room with a white patient. They also allocated a certain number of beds to black patients in a segregated ward or floor of the hospital. Henry Ford Hospital, a facility with 560 total beds, allotted thirty-six beds for black patients, all on the same floor. Grace Northwest Hospital had no beds for black patients. Mt. Carmel only accepted black patients into private rooms. Women's Hospital allotted fourteen beds to black obstetrics patients and fourteen beds for other black female patients. These twenty-eight beds were kept separate from the 214 beds reserved for white patients.<sup>4</sup> The pattern of segregation was repeated at almost every major hospital. Because of the restricted number of hospital beds for blacks, there were many cases in which a

4. Women's Committee to End Discrimination in the Medical Services, "A Report on Medical Discrimination in the City of Detroit," 1952. Detroit Urban League Collection, Box 42, Hospital and Medical Center Studies, 1951-52, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

black patient in need of serious medical attention was denied admission into a hospital because its black quota was filled. In addition, black patients admitted to hospitals received inferior care, resulting in higher death rates and a greater incidence of complications that could have been avoided with more attentive care.<sup>5</sup>

The major hospitals in Detroit generally denied black doctors staff privileges, which refers to the ability to admit patients to a hospital and treat them there. In 1952, of the 250 black doctors in the city, only fourteen had staff privileges. Many hospitals did not even bother to respond to written requests from black doctors for staff privileges. Only six of the more than fifty hospitals in the city had professional relationships with black doctors.<sup>6</sup> Black doctors often had to relinquish care of their patients to white physicians to get those patients admitted to hospitals. This discrimination against black doctors hampered their training and development, and it hurt hospital care for black patients as well, since they were denied the knowledge and consideration of their regular physicians. Moreover, the discrimination reinforced the bitter stereotype that black doctors were inferior to white doctors in expertise. This stereotype was so ingrained in the system that it frequently affected black health-care consumers, who often preferred white doctors. Most Detroit hospitals also refused to train and hire black nurses. As a result, many hospitals had no black medical professionals.

The practices of discrimination and segregation in health care were not much different in Detroit than in the Jim Crow South. Since the large hospitals in Detroit received federal funding, I decided to attack

5. Women's Committee to End Discrimination in the Medical Services, "A Report on Medical Discrimination in the City of Detroit," 1952. Detroit Urban League Collection, Box 42, Hospital and Medical Center Studies, 1951–52, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

6. Women's Committee to End Discrimination in the Medical Services, "A Report on Medical Discrimination in the City of Detroit," 1952. Detroit Urban League Collection, Box 42, Hospital and Medical Center Studies, 1951–52, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

the issue by writing the office of the United States Surgeon General, which had the authority to investigate whether the hospitals were in violation of federal law. In cooperation with the Detroit Urban League and other advocacy groups, we collected data and case histories to document the segregation and discrimination. Despite the strength of evidence, I received a reply from the Assistant Surgeon General, Dr. Jack. C. Haldeman, that the government would not withhold funds from a Detroit hospital practicing segregation. I also wrote to hospital administrators in Detroit and informed them that the NAACP would take legal action unless they changed their policies. Our lengthy campaign made some inroads, but it was not until the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 that Detroit hospitals turned the corner in respecting the rights of black medical professionals and black patients.

Of all the issues of racial oppression in Detroit, the most volatile was police behavior and brutality toward black citizens. The virtually all-white police force acted like an army of occupation, bent on harassing, intimidating, and abusing blacks. The problem was so pervasive that almost every black adult in the city had a personal experience or observation involving racially motivated police misconduct. The misconduct included: disrespectful, profane, and racist language; unreasonable and humiliating bodily searches in public places; illegal arrests; and violent treatment. Black motorists stopped by the police were habitually taunted. The officers always addressed the black individual by his or her first name. Women were often called “honey child” and asked suggestively, “Where’s your husband tonight?” Men were called “boy” and told, “This can’t be your car,” implying that blacks were incapable of owning nice things. The NAACP also regularly received complaints about the police confiscating money and items of value from the black residents they stopped.

The NAACP became the office of record for complaints of police misconduct against black citizens. When word got out in the black community that someone was making an effort to document incidents of brutality, victims came to my office to tell their stories.

White officers were notorious for beating up black citizens if they perceived any note of protest against offensive treatment. In many of these instances, police trumped up charges of drunkenness, disorderliness, or resisting arrest in order to apprehend innocent blacks who questioned why they were being harassed by the police. These charges were later dropped in court, but there was no redress for the violence inflicted on the innocent victims.

A young man named David Mundy came to my office in May of 1958, two days after he had been beaten by four plainclothes officers. The officers had just left a bar when they spotted David's girlfriend, Jo Ann Watkins, walking alone just after David said goodbye to her. The officers started propositioning Jo Ann as if she were a prostitute. David saw what was happening and came back to help Jo Ann. He asked the four men to stop talking to his girlfriend so rudely. One of men replied, "Do you mean that nigger bitch?" Another one then jumped on his back. David threw him off, and then all four men grabbed him. They then informed David that they were police. David stopped struggling, was handcuffed, and then put in an unmarked squad car. En route to the main precinct downtown, the two officers in back repeatedly hit David and called him "nigger," "monkey," and other racist taunts. One officer said, "We'll give you something to tell the NAACP." The beating continued at the precinct. David was charged with soliciting. He was found not guilty at trial.

A Chrysler autoworker, Mary Stewart, sat in my office a year before David's experience. She said she was driving at night with two girlfriends when they were stopped by a patrol car with three officers. Mary was ordered out of the car. She hesitated and then was forcibly removed from the driver's seat. One of the officers struck her in the face and shoulders with his nightstick, while the other officers restrained her by grabbing her hair and arms. Mary was thrown into the back of the patrol car and taken to the precinct. The desk sergeant asked her what had happened to her face. When Mary explained, the sergeant and the other officers laughed. Mary was taken to Receiving Hospital, where her face was stitched. She was then taken to the

lockup at the main precinct. She spent two days in jail on the charge of drunk driving. The charge was later dismissed.

The firsthand accounts of police brutality gave me a unique perspective on the extent of the problem. Over a five-year period between 1956 and 1960, I collected evidence of 149 incidents of police brutality. The beating was so severe in forty-seven of these cases that the black victim required hospitalization. About a third of all police brutality incidents occurred at the precinct. In these cases, police arrested a black person, took the suspect to the precinct, and then beat him or her mercilessly in a detention room or elsewhere at the station. When asked about the incident later, the officers would say dismissively that the suspect accidentally fell out of the chair during interrogation or somehow managed to hurt himself or herself in lockup. For each incident of brutality that was reported to me, I had a photographer take pictures of the injuries sustained by the victim. I sent detailed complaints and evidence to police and city officials. These officials not only turned a blind eye but tacitly endorsed police misconduct as way of repressing the black populace. Offending police officers never admitted to the brutality and were rarely held accountable. In only four cases did the police department admit any wrongdoing on the part of the misbehaving officers.

In addition to notifying officials about police brutality complaints, I would often send a press release and accompanying photos to the major papers and to the *Michigan Chronicle*, a black-owned newspaper in the city led by Longworth Quinn. The major newspapers had a standing arrangement not to cover incidents of police brutality, and invariably, only the *Chronicle* would publish an article. Each time the *Chronicle* told a story, other victims and witnesses of police brutality would step forward and come to my office. They wanted someone to take note of the insult and injustice they suffered, and the NAACP was their only recourse.

In December of 1960, I testified before the United States Commission on Civil Rights. The commission was in Detroit to investigate racial issues in the city. I was asked to speak specifically on the issue of

police brutality. After relating stories and statistics about the depth of the problem, I made several proposals for corrective action: First, I argued, an independent citizen review board should be established to adjudicate complaints of police brutality and make binding recommendations to the police department that would punish those officers found guilty of misconduct. Second, the police department needed to hire and promote more black officers. Only 3 percent of the police force was black, and these officers were concentrated in a few precincts and assigned the least significant police work.<sup>7</sup> Third, the department should provide meaningful race-relations training for existing officers. Fourth, the department should raise the educational and training requirements for new hires and increase its salaries to attract better-qualified people. Finally, city officials and community leaders needed to speak out against police brutality and make it clear that it must not be tolerated.

The city and police department would be slow to act on any of my proposals. I did not expect otherwise, because police misconduct and brutality were part of a broad policy to control blacks, contain them in segregated neighborhoods, relegate them to second-class citizenship, and keep them from aspiring toward better opportunities in employment, education, and quality of life. By not censuring the practices of police misconduct and brutality, the white corporate structure gave tacit approval to those entrenched practices. White leadership failed to heed a warning that black leadership brought to their attention: police brutality was causing a volatile rage to simmer in the black community that, if not calmed by significant reform, could one day erupt and engulf the city.

A month after I testified before the Civil Rights Commission, I experienced my own dangerous encounter with racist officers. I was leaving my home on Atkinson Street on the west side, not far from where the

7. G. Nelson Smith, "The Detroit Police Department's Policy and Practice in the Recruitment and Assignment of Police Officers," Detroit Urban League Community Services Department, December 1958. Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Detroit riot would begin some years later. It was a winter night and I was warming up my car and listening to the radio when a police car drove up next to my parked car and flashed its lights. I rolled down my window, and the officer on the passenger's side of the police car asked me brusquely, "What are you doing here?" I understood immediately that the officers were out to intimidate me, and I was determined not to back down. I responded indignantly, "What do you mean what am I doing here?" The officer quickly got out of his car, grasped the handle of my door, flung the door open, and yanked me out of the car. He twisted me around so that my back was to him and ordered me to put my hands up. The officer then grabbed the bottom of my overcoat and pulled it up over my head as he patted me down. He found my wallet, checked my license, and gave it back to me, perhaps recognizing who I was. I demanded that he explain why I had been accosted. He replied that they didn't have to answer my questions. I asked for their names, and he said, "We don't have to give you our names. Get them any other damn way you want." The officers then got back in their car. But before they could drive off, I walked directly in front of their car and stood so that they would have to run me over if they wanted to leave quickly. I yelled that if they were not going to give me their names, then I would take down their license plate number, go to the precinct, and file a complaint. "We don't give a damn," one of them yelled back.

I acted with a complete lack of fear when I stood in front of the officers' car. I certainly was aware, from all the stories I heard from police brutality victims, that the officers could have driven over me and then made some excuse about how I fell and hurt myself. But at that moment, I was determined to make a stand. I understood implicitly what Martin Luther King Jr. would later declare: "If an individual has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." Standing in front of the police car, I did in part what my anger led me to do and in part what my deepest belief needed me to do. The heightened mix of outrage and honor transcended fear.

After I returned to my car, the officers left right away, and I drove to the eighth precinct station. I was still incensed and resolute.

I thought of a strategy that was not altogether logical or sincere. I wanted to make a scene for the sake of making a scene. Inside the station, I started yelling for the sergeant in charge. I got everyone's attention and continued to carry on. I wanted to demonstrate to both the white officers and black citizens at the station that a black man who had been treated unjustly could come in and raise hell without being afraid to stand up to the system. The sergeant was quick to try to quiet me, and he asked me into his office. I gave him a livid and detailed account of what had happened. I left the precinct feeling that I had proved something to the people who were there and to myself.

Much as I lived with the dangers of being a civil rights leader in Detroit, I also understood that the South was a far more dangerous place for black leaders confronting systemic racism. The assassination of Medgar Evers on June 12, 1963, reminded me of this stark fact in visceral terms. Medgar, the field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi, worked diligently to establish local chapters and fight Jim Crow under perilous circumstances. I would see Medgar at annual national NAACP meetings, and we kept in close contact. As companions devoted to the struggle, we were brothers.

Medgar helped lead an independent investigation of the murder of Emmett Till on August 28, 1955, in Money, Mississippi. Emmett was fourteen years old when he was savagely beaten and shot to death by racists for allegedly flirting with a white woman. His body was dumped into the Tallahatchie River. The murder provoked outrage among blacks across the country. The Detroit NAACP organized a demonstration for Sunday, September 25, 1955. I invited Medgar to the rally, and he agreed to speak. Two days before our scheduled rally, an all-white jury in Mississippi acquitted Emmett's murderers despite overwhelming evidence of their guilt. The perfunctory verdict intensified the outrage in the black community and amplified interest in our event.

The rally was to be held at 3 p.m. in Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Bethel held 2,500 people, and it became apparent in the morning that the church could not accommodate everyone



Branch president Edward Turner, Medgar Evers, and myself before Medgar's speech in Detroit on September 25, 1955.



A crowd gathers to attend Medgar's appearance at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Detroit.

that wanted to come. Another church a block away, Scott Methodist, agreed to open its doors. More than six thousand people attended the rally at the two churches. It was the largest mass demonstration by blacks in Detroit history up until that time. Medgar spoke to the crowd about the courage of blacks in the South who were determined to participate in American democracy despite intimidation, sham “literacy tests,” and the knifings and shootings of those who refused to surrender their right to vote. He asked the crowd, “Shall we stop now?” In solemn unison, they replied, “No.” The Detroit NAACP took up a collection to help Emmett Till’s family and to support the investigation into his murder. More than \$14,000 was raised. All the money came from black Detroiters, since, as the newspapers noted, not one white person attended the rally to support the cause of ending racial injustice.

I spent time with Medgar and his wife Myrlie before and after the rally. His visibility during the murder investigation had increased the threats on his life, but he remained defiantly fearless. “You can kill a man,” he often said, “but you cannot kill an idea.” When Medgar was assassinated outside his home in 1963, I was in the midst of a campaign to stage peaceful marches in the virtually all-white Detroit suburbs to protest housing segregation and discrimination. In Warren and Redford, we encountered derisive jeers and racist taunts from angry whites that rivaled what civil rights marchers in the South experienced. The day before we marched in Dearborn, we were alerted that we would be met with violence, though it did not materialize. Since I was the executive secretary of the branch, I stood in the front line of every march and needed to set the example for my fellow marchers. I would not permit myself to be intimidated. We had fear to deal with, but we had to overcome it. When I learned that Medgar had been killed, after the initial shock and grief subsided, the first thing I thought was that although I had been faithful to the principles and obligations of our cause, I had not been exposed to the same dangers as Medgar. I felt chagrined. I had believed, until the moment of Medgar’s death, that I was an equal companion in the struggle. But there was a

vast difference between Detroit and Mississippi. I thought that I was on the firing line in Detroit and embodied the fearlessness that we in the movement were committed to. But Medgar faced everyday threats that required a level of courage to which I did not have to rise.

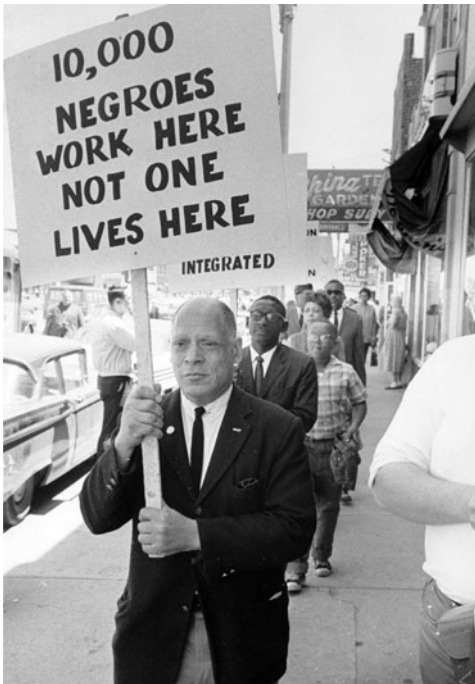
Six weeks after Medgar was killed, his widow Myrlie came to Detroit at my behest. The Detroit NAACP led a peaceful march of two hundred protesters against housing discrimination in the suburb of Oak Park. Myrlie and Rosa Parks were the honorary leaders and walked beside me.

In addition to our protests in the suburbs, we picketed apartment buildings in Detroit that refused to rent to African Americans. These demonstrations were organized by an action committee headed by Abe Ulmer, an NAACP member who worked as a Detroit school-teacher. We protested outside an upscale, all-white apartment building on the corner of John R and Kirby in the university cultural center. As a result, the management agreed to rent to several black professionals. We then began to picket an exclusive apartment building near the Detroit River. The protests embarrassed the white tenants, who then used their political contacts to press the new chief of police to intervene and stop our efforts. The tenants claimed their privacy rights were being violated.

The chief of police was George C. Edwards. He was a liberal Democrat who, at the behest of the recently elected mayor Jerome Cavanagh, had left his position as a justice on the Michigan Supreme Court to oversee the Detroit police force. Edwards was highly regarded for his civil rights advocacy, and Mayor Cavanagh brought him in to fulfill a promise to the black community to address the problem of racist police behavior. Cavanagh was first elected in November of 1961, largely on the strength of the black vote. Black leadership in the city, including Damon Keith and myself, rallied support for the Cavanagh campaign among African Americans. The incumbent mayor Louis Miriani had alienated the black community by implementing an aggressive anticrime crackdown in which the police would harass and often arrest any black individual who was deemed



The march against housing discrimination in Oak Park, Michigan, in 1963. In the front row, third from the end on the left, is Abraham Ulmer. Next to him is Rosa Parks, and then Edward Turner. I am on the far right, carrying a sign. Next to me is Myrlie Evers.



The NAACP-led march in Dearborn in 1963 to protest housing discrimination and segregation. *Front to back:* branch president Edward Turner, myself, Bobby Person, Joya Person.

to be “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Cavanagh, who at the time was a thirty-three-year-old attorney with very little political experience, pledged to end this policy and to build bridges with the black community. In the 1961 election, 30 percent of the electorate was black, and 85 percent of them voted for Cavanagh, propelling him to an upset victory and precipitating a hopeful celebration in the black community.

After Chief Edwards was contacted by the tenants of the all-white apartment building, he personally called on the NAACP board to restrain our action committee from demonstrating against private housing facilities. The board was divided on the issue, but a majority felt that the organization needed to honor the personal appeal from someone who was a strong friend of the black community. I was deeply disappointed with the board’s decision. I, too, considered Chief Edwards to be an ally. He had approached me about getting the NAACP’s support for raising the wages of Detroit police officers. This was an unprecedented gesture of respect toward our organization from the police administration, and we agreed to endorse the pay increases if it would help improve the department. However, I thought Chief Edwards’s request on the apartment issue was unreasonable because it deprived us of the only tactic we had to force the building’s owners to end their discriminatory practices. In my fourteen years as executive secretary of the branch, this was the only instance where I felt we compromised our convictions and lost our way in attacking an issue.

The summer of 1963 in Detroit featured the largest civil rights march in American history to that point. The march, called the “Walk to Freedom,” was organized by Reverend C. L. Franklin of New Bethel Baptist Church; the future state senator James Del Rio; the UAW president Walter Reuther; Benjamin McFall, owner of a leading funeral home in Detroit; and other community leaders. It was planned for June 23. At the end of the four-mile march down Woodward Avenue to Cobo Hall, Martin Luther King Jr. was to address the crowd.

The NAACP was not involved in planning the “Walk to Freedom.” March organizers did not engage the NAACP in the process, and some frictions developed around the perceived snub. Although there was tremendous cooperation among the various sectors of black leadership, there was also competition to be out front on the prominent issues and opportunities facing the moment. This competition was made more intense by a growing controversy among black leaders about whether the NAACP needed to be in the lead on every significant civil rights issue. Some people in the community at that time believed that the NAACP was actually against the march because of the risk that its grand scale might prove to be a disappointment and thus would harm the momentum of the movement. However, I can say categorically that the majority of the branch leadership did not oppose the march, even though some board members were initially skeptical about the idea. As the excitement about the march grew in the community, we understood that it was bound to be a milestone for the city and the nation. We supported the march but had to recognize that we did not have leadership participation in it. Because the branch was at the forefront of the all the issues of segregation, discrimination, and police brutality, not being a part of this landmark civil rights event particularly concerned me, and I knew that I had do something to advance the NAACP’s interest.

I came up with the idea that we should print a thousand placards that simply said “NAACP.” I got an estimate from a silk-screen company that this rush order would cost \$750. I asked the board to convene a closed-door meeting. The board authorized the funds, and we all agreed to keep my strategy a secret. I approached a trusted volunteer, Phil Gordon, to help me get the signs made and then bring them to the staging area for the march. We set the signs out and told marchers that the signs were there for the taking. Within minutes, all one thousand signs were gone.

An estimated 125,000 people marched in the Walk to Freedom. The event was covered by national and international media. When I watched the network news programs that same evening, I saw a

sea of NAACP signs toward the front of the march. I was thrilled. Looking at the pictures, viewers could not help but come away with the impression that the NAACP had played a prominent role in organizing the event and making it successful. I did not want to take credit for others' work, but I did not want to see the NAACP shut out of this important coverage.

At the march, I watched the procession from the roof of Cobo Hall. It was a breathtaking experience, and tears of joy welled in my eyes. I believe that every person who marched that day felt that they were making strides toward the African American hope and determination to be free. Up to this time, this was the most powerful statement of civil rights in the nation, and indeed the world. I watched the marchers file into Cobo to hear Martin speak. There was a deep irony at work. This venue, named after a racist mayor, was transformed by a man who would become the iconic voice for racial justice. Twenty years ago on this same day, the worst race riot in U.S. history happened in Detroit. The Walk to Freedom was a model of peaceful protest and racial cooperation.

Martin delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to the thousands gathered at Cobo. This was the first time Martin gave the address. He would deliver it again two months later before a vast crowd at the Lincoln Memorial in the nation's capital. Martin's voice this day in Detroit was never better. He had worked out the structure, rhythm, and climactic part of the speech so that it moved like a great piece of music. We were all utterly spellbound. He spoke about the difference between segregation in Detroit and the Deep South. "We must come to see," he said, "that de facto segregation in the North is just as injurious as the actual segregation in the South." Ours was a single struggle because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I spoke to Martin that night and congratulated him on his triumphant speech. We spoke as old friends, and as usual, I addressed him as "M.L." He wanted my advice on an important matter, but time and his pressing commitments did not permit that conversation then. We agreed to resume our talk after the March on Washington. My former

and young classmate at Morehouse College was now, without a doubt, the indisputable leader of the civil rights movement.

Martin and I had remained in touch when I came to the leadership post at the Detroit NAACP. We would see each other when he was in town, and we corresponded and spoke by phone regularly. As he grew into his calling, the demands of his schedule made it increasingly more difficult for him to devote time to friends and their interests. I understood this, though on occasion it was a source of frustration. There were things that Martin could have done to help the NAACP that he chose not to do because he had taken up the challenge of building the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The NAACP and the SCLC were not altogether complementary organizations in the movement, and we sometimes found ourselves competing for leadership roles, resources, and publicity. Whether or not we wanted to acknowledge it, the unfortunate reality was that each of the various civil rights groups was also a kind of business, and in this business, success was measured by who got what done.

In March of 1958, I wrote to Martin and asked him to appear at an event for the Detroit NAACP's Freedom Fund Campaign. Martin was already scheduled to be in Detroit, and I wanted him to fit us into his schedule. I was very disappointed when Martin declined my invitation, and I wrote him back asking him to "be ever mindful that a helping hand from you is ten, twenty-five, one hundred times more productive than that of countless other friends whose resources and influence can never quite measure up to their interest in this work." Martin responded when he returned to his office in Montgomery, Alabama. He apologized for not being able to attend our event. He continued:

I do hope you will understand that my non-acceptance was not due to a lack of interest, but to the tremendous pressures of an overcrowded schedule.

My physician has insisted that I slow down or face the tragedy of a physical break down. There are ever so many things that I would like to do, that I would enjoy doing, such as being with you on your Freedom Fund program, but they are physically impossible . . .

Let me commend you for the great work you are doing with the Detroit branch. I am always happy when I hear of your success. You are doing a job, not only for Detroit and the Negro, but for the whole of American democracy. You have my prayers and best wishes for continued success in all of your endeavors.

Sincerely yours,  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin's gracious letter disarmed my frustration. It reminded me of the enormous stress he was under and of the strength of our friendship, since he had taken the time to write a candid response.

The Freedom Fund Dinner was in its third year when Martin and I exchanged letters about the event. The NAACP started this campaign in 1956, and it soon became the most important fundraising event not only for the branch but also for the NAACP as a whole. I conceived the idea of the Freedom Fund Dinner in late 1955 after the national chairman of the NAACP, Dr. Channing H. Tobias, had called for the establishment of a one-million-dollar "Fight for Freedom" fund. Each of the branches was asked to create a new fundraising event, with half of the proceeds going to the National Freedom Fund and the other half going to the branch itself. I felt that the black professional community in Detroit was ready to support an elegant and signature dinner event with a ticket price of \$100 per couple. To be successful, the event needed to be well-managed and well-marketed and feature, as its keynote speaker, someone greatly admired in the black community. Most of all, the dinner needed to have great social appeal.

My confidence that the idea would succeed was inspired by my organizing experiences and by observations of the dynamics of fundraising events. In 1953, the branch was in acute financial difficulty. In general, we were always strapped for cash, and we lived with this struggle as a routine part of our mission. We had often had a hard time making the rent, and I sometimes would not collect my own modest salary so that my assistant would be paid. But this time, the financial problem threatened our work, and I was quite worried. I



In the Holiday Room of the Gotham Hotel in Detroit, 1953. *Left to right:* Edward Turner, branch president; Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP; Dr. James J. McClendon; Mamie Thompson; Josephine Baker; Joseph Craigen.

called Josephine Baker, whom I had met on a previous occasion, and told her that the branch was desperate for money. I asked her for a few minutes of her time when she came to town to appear at a private reception at the Gotham Hotel. She graciously agreed. The event drew many black professionals who wanted to see this already legendary and glamorous performer. Also in attendance were Nat King Cole and his wife Maria, Dr. Benjamin Mays, and Walter White. Josephine spoke to the gathering and made a passionate appeal to support the branch and its important work. She said that she would start the process by immediately contributing \$100 in cash. Within minutes, every man in the room followed suit. This experience taught me something about the effective use of star power and peer pressure.

I took my idea of an ambitious fundraising dinner to the president of the branch, Ed Turner. He approved it and told me to move forward.

A few board members expressed doubts that the idea could work, but these voices were drowned out by supporters. Though the ticket price was steep, I never doubted that there were enough members of the black community who had the means and the willingness to support the event if it smartly combined allure and obligation. I decided to ask Thurgood Marshall, who was chief counsel of the NAACP, to be the keynote speaker. Thurgood was the most charismatic figure in the NAACP at the time. His work on the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 had earned him a towering reputation in the black community. When Thurgood agreed to appear at the dinner, the event acquired a prestige and authority that signaled its due importance.

We decided that the first people we should approach about attending the event were black physicians. Accordingly, we needed a prominent medical professional to serve as the first chair of the Freedom Fund Dinner. Our first choice was Dr. DeWitt T. Burton, who had developed Burton Mercy Hospital, which served black patients and physicians. Dr. Burton was one of the strongest members of the branch, but he reasoned that he could be most effective working behind the scenes to get colleagues and clients to support the event rather than serving in an official capacity. His assessment proved to be right. We turned to Dr. Alfred E. Thomas to be the first chair.

The first dinner was scheduled for April 1956. Dr. Thomas assembled a small group of branch executives: Moses Fritz, who served as branch treasurer, Ed Turner, and me. Dr. Thomas then arranged for our group to make a presentation to a meeting of the Detroit Medical Society at the Gotham Hotel in February. The Detroit Medical Society was an association of black doctors. The doctors were very receptive to our idea. They were also looking for a way to honor a recently fallen colleague. On February 18, Dr. Thomas Brewer, who helped organize the NAACP chapter in Columbus, Georgia, was murdered. A white policeman shot him seven times after Dr. Brewer refused to yield to death threats demanding that he stop his advocacy for equal voting rights. Dr. Brewer had many friends and close family in Detroit,



The first Freedom Fund Dinner Committee in 1956. *Left to right:* Joseph Craigen, a member of the Detroit NAACP board; Emory Jackson, editor of the *Birmingham World*; Leon Wallace; Dr. Alfred Thomas, the committee chair.

including two sisters and a brother who was also a doctor. We asked all fifty-nine doctors at the meeting to buy tickets to the Freedom Fund Dinner. They responded in force and gave the campaign an initial momentum that would carry it to success. In addition, Dr. Lionel F. Swan agreed to serve as co-chair of the dinner. At his own expense, he hired two women to call other black doctors and ask them to participate in the event. If a doctor said yes, one of the women would immediately go the doctor's office and complete the transaction.

We enlisted the *Michigan Chronicle* to help with the marketing of the event. Each week leading up to the dinner, the *Chronicle* published

the names of everyone who had bought tickets. The recognition was a source of pride for supporters. It also applied subtle pressure on those who had not purchased tickets and whom the community expected to be in attendance. Ultimately, three hundred tickets were sold, virtually all of them to African Americans. Dr. Burton persuaded many of his business acquaintances to subscribe. He even secured a \$100 cash contribution from Robert McNamara, a top-level executive at Ford Motor Company who did not want to be recognized because of the possible backlash from white car buyers. McNamara later became Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy administration.

The first Freedom Fund Dinner was held at the Latin Quarter, which was the most elegant banquet facility at the time that accepted black clientele. The evening was a magnificent success and created a great deal of anticipation for next year's event. It also provided impetus to the branch as a whole. In 1957, Damon Keith directed the membership campaign. Under Damon's leadership, branch membership reached 29,000, the highest total any NAACP branch in the country would ever have. Damon also served as a co-chair of the annual dinner and became the first person to reach \$10,000 in ticket sales. Each subsequent year, the event raised more money than the year before. The Freedom Fund Dinner almost single-handedly lifted the branch out of its financial straits.

Our fundraising success in Detroit intrigued Martin Luther King. When he became head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1959 and moved to Atlanta, we began to communicate more often than before. Because we were bound by friendship, Morehouse, and the movement, Martin sought my counsel about raising money, and I freely offered my advice. I understood that Martin would not be able to appear at our Freedom Fund events because the NAACP and the SCLC, in the larger context, were competitors for the civil rights dollar. The private context was very different, however. Whenever I traveled to Atlanta, I visited Martin and his close associate Ralph Abernathy. We met in either Ralph's home or Martin's home and talked at length about fundraising strategies,

among other things. It was a very relaxed atmosphere, and each of us felt that we could be ourselves. It was a place of respite from the demands and personas of the struggle. Martin loved a good joke of any sort and was always appreciative of new material. Ralph and I were happy to oblige.

Securing the funds to do the work we needed to do was a continual frustration for all of us in the movement. There was never enough money to fight on the number of fronts we wanted to fight, and we felt disappointed by the disparity between our passionate convictions and our limited resources. The black community in general was not well off, but even so, it could have done better in supporting a cause that meant everything to its future. In particular, the contributions of the black middle class were not commensurate with either its ability to help or the stake it held in our efforts. We in the leadership did not complain about this fact. Rather, we were always seeking for ways to involve more people in the movement. Even though the marches and protests were attracting greater numbers, in reality, a relatively small percentage of blacks were participating, and we wished that more blacks would become active and recognize that there was no honorable way to avoid confronting the enemy.

I was one of the more than 200,000 people in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, to witness the songs and speeches of the March on Washington. I was not near the stage. I was a soldier in the field gathered with the multitude who had come from all over the country to demonstrate for congressional passage of President John Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill. Martin's "I Have a Dream" speech was the closing and climactic moment of the watershed event. I did not expect to talk to Martin in person in Washington, but we found each other at a private reception later in the evening. Few words were exchanged between us, since it was impossible to articulate the scope and depth of the experience that day. We embraced and shared an unspoken awe of this historic event. In the long and painful struggle, this was a moment of considerable optimism for the civil rights movement. The conscience of the nation was roused. John Kennedy was in the White



1966 Freedom Fund Dinner participants. *Left to right:* Dr. Robert Weaver, secretary of HUD; Dick Gregory (*front*); Forrest Green; Dr. James J. McClendon; Judge Wade McCree.



1966 Freedom Fund Dinner. *Left to right:* Dr. Robert C. Weaver, Beatrice Preston, Benjamin McFalls.



1970 Freedom Fund Dinner. *Left to right:* Retired Chief Justice Earl Warren, myself, State Supreme Court Justice Theodore Souris, Judge Damon Keith.



At a meeting with federal officials regarding civil rights legislation, Washington D.C., 1963. *Left to right:* Joseph Coles, myself, Damon Keith, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Richard Marx, State Senator David Holmes, Vice President Lyndon Johnson.

House. His brother Bobby was Attorney General. Federal legislation to end segregation and discrimination was pending. Martin had emerged as a dramatic voice for the struggle. The NAACP, the SCLC, the Urban League, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were strong and effective organizations. We believed that we had turned the corner, and though the distance to our goals was still significant, it seemed much less daunting than it had just a few years before.

President Kennedy was not initially in favor of the March on Washington. He was concerned that some congressional members who were wavering on the civil rights legislation would react defiantly to being pressured by a mass rally at their doorstep. After Kennedy was unable to dissuade march organizers, however, he lent

his support to the event. Kennedy's stance on the march reminded me of a pivotal moment in his campaign for the presidency when he made a remark that was contrary to the aspirations of the civil rights movement. Civil rights leaders in Detroit decided that we needed to intervene and ask the candidate to set the record straight.

During the Democratic presidential primaries in the spring of 1960, Senator Kennedy was asked to comment on the sit-in protesters and freedom riders in the South. Kennedy responded that he supported the protesters insofar as they did not misbehave. Black leaders around the country were indignant at Kennedy's tepid and conditional endorsement of the valiant efforts of civil rights activists in the South working under conditions of great duress and danger. Even before this remark, Kennedy was not doing well with black voters. Although he was liberal-minded and in principle an advocate for the civil rights movement, he was deliberately cautious about stating his unqualified support for the cause and risking further alienation from white Southern Democrats. He needed those white votes to win the presidency, and he compromised his civil rights language to try to keep them in the fold. This compromise offended many in the black community. Leaders such as Jackie Robinson and Adam Clayton Powell spoke out against Kennedy's civil rights position. Some leaders even suggested that Kennedy's Republican opponent, Richard Nixon, might be a better choice in terms of advancing the cause.

After Kennedy's misguided campaign remark, which further damaged his standing with black voters, I met in Detroit with Damon Keith, Joe Coles, Richard Austin, Nicholas Hood, Horace Sheffield, Forrest Green, Jim Wadsworth, and Mildred Jeffrey. We decided that we must find a way to meet with Kennedy and persuade him to abide by his deepest principles and offer unconditional support to the civil rights struggle. Mildred got in touch with Michigan governor G. Mennen Williams, a trusted ally of the movement and a liberal Democratic leader who knew Kennedy personally and could arrange the meeting we wanted. Governor Williams contacted the senator and we were invited to go to Washington and speak directly

to Kennedy in his Georgetown home. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the meeting because of illness. There are very few important appointments in my life that I have missed and deeply regret. This occasion tops the short list.

Damon later reported to me what transpired at the meeting. Mildred Jeffrey, a Michigan delegate to the Democratic National Convention, outlined our argument to Kennedy. However, Kennedy still did not grasp why his civil rights remarks upset the black community. The contingent of Detroit leaders then tried to explain to him why he was losing the respect of black voters. Finally, Governor Williams said to Kennedy, "Look Jack, what they are saying is that if I invite you to dinner in my home, I do not ask you to wash your hands before you come. I assume that you are a responsible human being." Kennedy nodded his approval, and he promised to seize whatever opportunities would emerge in the future to try to correct the bad impressions he had made with black voters by having admonished civil rights protesters to behave during their rightful and peaceful disobedience.

Not long after our meeting, such an opportunity arose, and Kennedy stepped up. He gave a speech in which he extolled the sit-in demonstrators seeking to integrate restaurants and other facilities. The protests, he said, proved that "the American spirit is coming alive again." He commended the demonstrators for their nonviolent actions and said that the social tensions caused by the protests were "part of the price of change."<sup>8</sup> Kennedy firmly allied himself with the movement and its goals of equal justice and said that government needed to get involved to help realize those goals. Kennedy's categorical support for the movement turned the tide with black voters. In the November election, he captured more than 70 percent of the black vote and won the presidency by a narrow margin. The black vote was a decisive factor.

8. Anthony Lewis, "Kennedy Salutes Negroes' Sit-ins," *New York Times*, June 24, 1963.

With a strong ally in the White House, we believed we were on the verge of major breakthroughs. President Kennedy proposed his sweeping Civil Rights Bill on June 11, 1963, the day before Medgar Evers was murdered. The Great March came two and a half months later. The heightened optimism we felt after Washington, however, would soon suffer terrible setbacks. Just two weeks later, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was firebombed by the Ku Klux Klan. Four girls burned to death. The FBI, under J. Edgar Hoover, refused to fully investigate the horrific crime. In November, President Kennedy was assassinated, and a terrible pall fell on us all. Moments of past triumph seemed to lose their luster and meaning. The remorseless violence took a toll on my optimism and brought me to a point where I felt overwhelmed. It was painfully evident that the forces of evil had escalated their attacks just when our dreams of justice seemed more attainable. I wondered if it might be impossible to do the job that had to be done, and I despaired that nothing I had accomplished was adequate, particularly when people were losing their lives in the Deep South fighting the enemy on the front line. But I also understood that there was no honorable way to escape the commitment and heartbreak of the civil rights struggle.

I spent fourteen years as the executive secretary of the Detroit NAACP. I took the job in 1950 with the intention of staying three years, but it was soon apparent that the job and the city had other plans for me. Those fourteen years were the most vital and productive years of my life. To realize the challenges of my civil rights work, I had to cultivate expertise in communications, organizational psychology, political strategy and tactics, press relations, and fundraising. The work made me realize that I belonged in Detroit. I came to the city not knowing anyone here, but the network of relationships that grew around me made the city home, and I knew that I could not leave it. The professional and personal ties rooted my life's meaning in this place.

A short time after I came to Detroit, I started to date a young black woman who was a student at Wayne State University. Her name was

Thelma Thorpe. I first met her when she came to my office seeking help from the NAACP after she had been fired from a government job because of her alleged Communist sympathies. Thelma was a non-active member of American Youth for Democracy. The group had come under intense scrutiny from the anti-Communist witch hunt of McCarthyism, and people on the group's membership list were unceremoniously dismissed from their jobs after the government obtained the list. I was very concerned that the constitutional principles of our nation were under attack by ideologues who propagandized that Communists were everywhere and were an internal threat to the nation. So, when Thelma brought her case to my attention, I immediately called two black lawyers—Henry Heading and John Williams—and persuaded them to represent her on a gratis basis, since she could not afford counsel. Thelma lost her case at the local hearing, but her lawyers thought that we should appeal to the next level. I decided to engage a lawyer who had a strong anti-Communist reputation to represent Thelma on appeal. This attorney, Abe Zwerdling, won the case, and the government agreed to rehire Thelma. During the lengthy legal process, I began seeing Thelma. We married in 1951, even before the case finally and favorably concluded.

In retrospect, I think my becoming involved with Thelma and then asking her to become my wife was in part my own statement of defiance against the system of injustice that she was fighting. I also realize that during our marriage, I gave much of my time and my best energies to my work, which was detrimental to our relationship. Thelma and I had three sons, Averell, Brian, and Carl, but after thirteen years of marriage, we were divorced, just as I was departing as leader of the Detroit NAACP.

A few years later, I married Loretta Jenkins. I first met Loretta in circumstances that resembled the way I met Thelma: Loretta came to my NAACP office with four other African American women to file a complaint. All five women were “practical nurses”—nurses who had limited training and who worked under the supervision of registered nurses. The five women told me that the hospital where they were

working practiced racial discrimination in its treatment of members of the practical nursing staff. I looked into the matter, but it was never resolved. After Loretta and I were married, she continued to work as a practical nurse.

Loretta and I had one child together, David. I also gained two other children in the marriage to Loretta. Loretta had a son and daughter from her first marriage, Wendell and Angela. The psychologist Erik Erikson has said, "Children confirm parenthood." By this, he meant that the measure of being a parent is how the child comes to feel about you. I loved Angela and Wendell so much that they ultimately claimed me as their father.

In the course of things, the marriage to Loretta fell into great difficulty because of financial issues and other problems, and we were eventually divorced. I felt a deep anguish about this, as I did in my first marriage, because I did not want to be separated from my children. But it was quite evident that Loretta and I could no longer live together. After my second marriage ended, I began to wonder whether I was fit for the commitment of marriage and whether I had all that it takes. I would not redeem these personal doubts until Chacona Winters came into my life.