Toms River NAACP turns 50

by Victoria Lassonde

Bahiyyah Abdullah, community activist and president of the Toms River branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was eight years old in 1964, the year the Civil Rights Act was signed by Pres. Lyndon Johnson. At that time, Abdullah attended a segregated school in North Carolina and paid close attention to the unrest and injustice she saw around her and on the television news. "I had a vivid knowledge of what was going on," she said.

She, like so many who grew up during that time, was deeply affected, and personally shaped, by the profound and often polarizing events of the Civil Rights Movement.

"I remember when Martin Luther King passed away; I remember all these things; … the cross burnings. It's a part of what I know, because I lived through it." Through the NAACP she works to keep those historic experiences alive, and not forgotten, in the American consciousness, but also to counteract the traces of longstanding inequalities that persist even today.

The NAACP was originally founded 104 years ago in New York City, on Abraham Lincoln's birthday, to be an instrument of change and to ensure the political, economic, educational and social rights of all people are upheld and to eliminate hatred and discrimination. The organization is non-denominational and non-partisan, Abdullah said. "Although there are no religious requirements for belonging to the NAACP, the Black/African American Church has played and continues to greatly support the NAACP and its work. Many of the leaders of the NAACP have come from the religious community," she explained.

Ocean County has two units, or branches. Abdullah serves as president of the Toms River branch, which handles the area from Seaside to Little Egg Harbor, and will mark its 50th year in 2015. The other is the Ocean County-Lakewood branch.

Throughout its history, different issues have come to the fore at different times. In recent years, the NAACP has focused on ending voter suppression, especially leading up to the last presidential election, by urging people to exercise their right to participate in the democratic process.

Abdullah has been a member of the branch for 30 years and has served as president for the last nine.

With community service and education as guiding principles in her life, Abdullah also works fulltime on staff with the Girl Scouts of New Jersey; serves as president of the Ocean County chapter of Continental Societies, a women-run service organization for at-risk youth and children with special needs; and sits on the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, the board of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ocean County and the American Conference on Diversity. "Some have national connections," she said. "I just work at the local level."

For her, the humanitarian drive stems from her gratitude toward those who helped her along her path, and from a natural belief in giving back, she said. "We all have an obligation to give back."



Photo Credit: Ocean County C&H Staff

Iwa L'ewa's Kwanzaa Program at Ocean County College for Kwanzaa.

Nationally, the NAAC organizes marches, such as the one last March in New York City against the billionaire Koch Brothers. The organization is a not-for-profit entity with no government funding sources, aside from grants. The individual branches are comprised of racially diverse members and officers who believe in, and stand for, the equal rights and equal treatment of all people, Abdullah said.

At the local level, the organization's primary role is to establish a strong community presence and to serve as a resource for individuals, a vehicle between citizens and their government; to help walk people through matters of discrimination and to help resolve them; and to bring, through a strong outreach component, attention and awareness to important issues as they arise – employment practices and fair, affordable housing, for example. The organization plays a vital role as watchdog and speaks out, when necessary, against racial prejudice.

"Every citizen should be aware of what their elected officials are doing," she said. Once a year the branch hosts a Candidates' Night, where politicians meet, greet and get to know the voting public, and vice versa. Black History Month in February provides another avenue for special events, in conjunction with the Toms River branch of Ocean County Library, that highlight and educate the public about African-Americans' contributions to the country.

"It's a constant education process," she said.

While plans are not yet in the works to celebrate the branch's 50th anniversary in 2015, this year marks several important anniversaries in black history, Abdullah pointed out. Jan. 1 was the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery. June marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers in Jackson, Miss. And, this August, it's been 50 years since the historic march on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s immortal "I Have a Dream" speech. Every May the branch hosts a Freedom Fund dinner to present a theme to the community and to raise funds for programming. Each August a back-to-school drive benefits kids in South Toms River with donations of backpacks and other supplies.

With Civil Rights leaders aging out or passing away, she said, there is a push to engage younger people, to show them why they shouldn't take their liberties for

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Photo Credit: Ocean County C&H Staff

Detail of Mural at Laurity Winery by Muralist Painting Studio.

granted.

Abdullah said she feels a lot of progress has been made toward eradicating racial bias, but a lot of work remains to be done. "A lot of it comes from ignorance," she said. She emphasized: Education is key.

The Ocean County branch of the NAACP was formed in 1964, by Rev. Turner Hicks, with the goal to reach out on issues of racial equality in whatever form they might take. For example, the NAACP is concerned with the disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic males who are incarcerated; and with the stresses and challenges felt by minority schoolchildren in a predominantly white student body. "No child should be afraid of going to school," she said. The branch also raises and awards scholarships to deserving students to extend opportunities for continuing education.

The branch might send letters to state legislators and congressmen to lobby for positive changes in the ongoing fight for equality, or, if an issue catches enough widespread attention, a demonstration might be organized when a statement really needs to be driven home. "Each unit is the eyes and ears for the national organization," she explained. Because technology keeps people more connected than ever before, she added, it's hard to separate what happens nationally from our local lives.

All the branches convene once a year at a national convention to share ideas and advance the organization's mission and central causes.

The demographic breakdown of Ocean County shows about 90 percent of the population is white. A person's ethnic heritage can have a major impact on shaping the individual through experience, which in turn can be a factor in school, work and social environments.

In extreme cases of civil rights infringement, the branch has a working partnership with the state Division of Civil Rights (within the Department of Justice), and consults with the county prosecutor, and can accompany an individual to a court hearing for moral support. Additionally, the national NAACP has an advocacy department in D.C. that works on policy issues and, as a whole, the organization utilizes social and mass media to convey the mission.

The fight to erase inequality is being fought on many levels, Abdullah explained – on the streets, in the courts, and intellectually. But the most important work to be done is inside each of us.

On a personal level, "you just work every day to make sure you do your part," she said. Perosnal responsibility begins by asking, What is my role? What is my contribution? I know discrimination exists, so, what can I do to change that? "People have to make their choices," she said.

Knowing history is an important part of making informed choices, she added, because history provides a framework, or context, in which to better understand the contributions of a whole group of people. The thinking is everyone stands to benefit from learning more about each other, in order to get along better.