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## Local News

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### Seattle NAACP at 100: 'We need to pass the baton'

On the 100th anniversary of the Seattle King County NAACP, a number of its leaders tell anecdotes of what life here has been for them.

By Erik Lacitis

Seattle Times staff reporter



They remember.

They talk about looking to buy a home outside what was determined to be the black area in the Central District, and real-estate agents simply refusing to show them.

They talk about the sting of having dinner in a restaurant and hearing slurs from a nearby table.

They talk about being pulled over for driving while black.

On Saturday night, some 600 people will gather to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Seattle King County NAACP.

As is befitting such an occasion, there will be speeches at the dinner and dance at the DoubleTree by Hilton Seattle Airport.

The local NAACP is the oldest branch of the organization west of the Mississippi. Its causes have ranged from protesting the innovative but racist 1915 film, "Birth of a Nation," to working in the 1960s to get department stores and supermarkets to hire blacks.

Among those honored Saturday will be Lacy Steele, who now is 81 and was president of the local NAACP for 26 years until 1999.

He knows the 1,500-member organization needs to recruit younger people.

"The group that's missing is the 25- to 40-year-olds. We're not going to be around here forever. We need to pass the baton to somebody," says Steele.

The thing is, he says, "These young people have never experienced what older people have."

But they do hear from some of them. "When there is difficulty at work, when they don't get treated right at a restaurant, or there is a police stop, then they call us," says Steele.

For this story, four longtime members recalled sometimes-searing personal incidents from past years.

### **Retired King County Superior Court Judge Donald Haley**

He is 80, lives in North Seattle and was a partner in a Seattle law firm. He retired as a judge in 2002 after more than 20 years of service. He was president of the local NAACP from 1969 to 1972.

Haley grew up in rural Louisiana and attended an all-black high school.

“The teachers thought I was college material. But I couldn’t go to a historical black college because my dad was a farm laborer and I couldn’t get enough money,” he said.

“I had a cousin in Seattle and he said, ‘Come on up, live with me, work your way through the University of Washington.’”

Haley started at the UW in 1955, doing odd jobs. Then he got a job as a riveter at Boeing on the swing shift, and took classes in the morning.

“After a year with my cousin, I lived in the dorms. It seems unreal: We never discussed race.”

He got his degree in political science.

He remembers the associate professor who was his adviser accusing him of only wanting to be “a political-science graduate so you can get a big government job and be the boss of white people.”

When Haley then decided to go to law school, the adviser wanted him back for graduate work in political science. Haley said no.

“In those days, they’d let in three or four African Americans in law school, and then scare them out, that it was too difficult. There were two of us in my class and we both graduated.

“The other law students had a better high-school education than I did. The odds were against me. So I just worked twice as hard and went over lessons over and over.”

After graduation, Haley worked for four years as an administrative law judge for the state’s Board of Industrial Insurance Appeals.

Then he started a law firm with three other attorneys. Existing white law firms, he said, “wouldn’t give you a second look.”

For Haley, what his UW adviser told him still sticks.

“I won that battle. One-on-one,” he says.

### **Carolyn Riley-Payne**

Now in her 60s, Riley-Payne, of Lake Forest Park, has worked as a special-education teacher and as a human-resources manager for NOAA. For 30 years, she worked with an NAACP youth program called ACT-SO, for Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics.

“I grew up in Durham, N.C., in a progressively African-American community. So my black experience was a little different.

“When I was 12, I was an officer in the NAACP youth council. We were part of a demonstration against a pancake house that they wanted to integrate. If you were black you could not go in and sit down.

“When we demonstrated the crowd around us hit us with eggs. The police came and told us to disperse. We sang, ‘We Shall Overcome.’ The police took billy clubs and hit us on top of our heads. I have a scar to show it.”

She came to Seattle in 1975 when her husband got a job as a scientist at NOAA.

In 1976, she says, she and a friend, a white woman, went to a broiler in Wedgwood, where Riley-Payne lived. “Then one of the patrons said the ‘N’ word loud enough so I could hear it.

“My friend was so offended she started crying. I went up to the man and said, ‘Sir, you need to be very careful of what you say. You just insulted someone’s daughter and someone’s sister and someone’s wife. I hope you never use that word again.’

“When alcohol flows, people say what’s in their minds and hearts. They say it more freely. Afterward, his wife came and apologized.”

She recalled one incident in which a store clerk at first wouldn’t wait on her. She left and wrote a letter to the company.

“They wanted to send me a gift certificate. I said I wanted them to support ACT-SO.

“In that program, we want to have the same respect for cultural achievements as are awarded in the world of sports.

“We tell them not all kids will make the basketball team or the football team.”

### **Retired King County Judge Charles V. Johnson**

He is 85, lives in Seattle and was a leading figure in the hiring of African Americans in department stores and supermarkets and the passing of the open-housing ordinance that opened neighborhoods to minorities.

In 1969 he was appointed to the Seattle Municipal Court, and in 1981 to the King County Superior Court, from where he retired in 1998. He was president of the local NAACP from 1958 to 1963.

He went to college in Arkansas for two years, then into the Army for four, before coming to Seattle to finish his degree. Johnson went to classes during the day and worked at a post office at night. He graduated in 1957.

While going to school, Johnson, and his wife, Lazelle, rented a basement in a Central Area home. She worked as a clerk at Boeing. Using the savings from her income, in 1958 they bought a home on the edge of the Central Area.

Seattle was a place that still had housing covenants such as this for Laurelhurst: “No property in said plat shall at any time, directly or indirectly be sold, conveyed, rented or leased in whole or in part to any person not of the White Race.”

In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled such covenants were unenforceable, but they were still there, as a reminder of past history.

“Around 1957, 1958, a real good friend of mine moved here because Boeing brought him out. They were trying to find an apartment for him and his wife.

“At that time, there were unwritten laws in the real-estate industry. They didn’t show apartments or houses to blacks outside the Central Area.”

“My friend went to a real-estate agent at 34th and Union. The lady there didn’t show them anything. That was considered outside the Central Area, which was roughly from Republican Street and South Jackson Street, and from 14th to maybe 29th.

“My friend’s wife left the real-estate office, and not too far, at 34th and Marion, happened to see a ‘For Rent’ sign on a window on a fourplex. She knocked on the door, and the lady who owned it said she’d rent to her and husband.”

The NAACP pushed for an Open Housing Ordinance in Seattle. Johnson remembers a 1963 demonstration at City Hall that ended up in a sit-in and 23 arrests, many of those arrested of high-school age.

Johnson says he negotiated with the prosecutor to have the charges dismissed.

“I don’t think at the time it hit the kids that this could follow them through life. When the charges were dismissed by the judge, the kids were happy. And their parents were really happy.”

And what did Johnson think of the kids and their sit-in?

“I was proud of them.”

On April 19, 1968, three weeks after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., an open-housing ordinance was passed unanimously by the City Council.

### **Lacy Steele**

He is 81 and lives in Bellevue. He worked at Boeing for 38 years and was the first African-American manager in the aerospace division. For 26 years, until 1999, he was president of the local NAACP.

Steele grew up in Detroit and came to Seattle in 1959.

Once, police came to his door and said neighbors had called about a loud noise.

“I said, ‘Officer, you just walked on my front porch. Did you hear anything?’ The officer said, ‘No.’

“Before they left they asked another question: ‘One of your friends have a new Buick Riviera?’ They wanted to know whose car that was. I said, ‘Why do you want to know? The car has a license, it’s parked legally.’ They shut up and left.”

He says he’s been stopped by police four or five times in Seattle: “We couldn’t see your license plate. You have a taillight that’s blinking. Sorry about the inconvenience, go about your business.

“After I became president (in 1973 of the local NAACP) I never got stopped.”

Every day since 1973, he’s worn an NAACP medallion.

“At Boeing they’d say I was the guy who always wore the NAACP necklace. Somebody sees it, they ask. It pays to advertise.”

He still goes to the NAACP offices three days a week to answer phones.

“I’ve been doing that ever since the early ’60s. When I was at Boeing, I’d stop in after work, and on weekends.

“We get 25 to 30 valid calls a week, about employment discrimination, being followed by the police, housing issues. We try to convince them how important documentation is.”

“Am I bitter? No. I don't get angry. You get angry and you have defeated yourself. I want facts, not emotion.”

*News researchers Gene Balk and Miyoko Wolf contributed to this report.*

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