

Black community loses major political ally

by *Marc_H._Morial*

The black community, especially black-owned business, lost a major ally in Parren Mitchell, the former Maryland congressman who was instrumental in pushing through legislation requiring 10 percent of government contracts to go to minority firms.

The so-called 10 percent set-aside helped open the door for countless black businesses to the government contracting world, which up until then had been largely elusive to minorities.

Late last month, Mitchell, 85, who led the U.S. House Small Business Committee and was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, succumbed to complications of pneumonia.

The son of a waiter and a homemaker, he served in the U.S. Army during World War II, earning a Purple Heart after being wounded in Italy. He left the military to earn a bachelor's degree from Morgan State University and then a master's in sociology from the University of Maryland at College Park, the first black to do so. He, however, was forced to sue the university to gain admission to its graduate school.

Mitchell was part of the famous "Goon Squad," a group of civil rights activists in Baltimore from the church, education and other professions dedicated to ending segregation and ensuring equality of blacks in a largely black city.

"At that time you couldn't get a hamburger in a greasy spoon," observed Homer Favor, a fellow member of the group, to the Baltimore Times.

Mitchell cut his teeth under the administrations of Baltimore Mayors Theodore R. McKeldin and Thomas J. D'Alesandro III and Maryland Gov. J. Millard Tawes. From 1961 to 1965, Mitchell served as director of the Maryland Commission of Human Relations and then as head of the Baltimore Community Action Agency for three years.

After an unsuccessful congressional bid in 1967, he won election to represent Maryland's 7th District in 1970. From 1971 to 1987, Mitchell championed affirmative action and used his Small Business Committee chairmanship to help minorities break the color barrier in the corporate world.

His older brother, the late Clarence M. Mitchell Jr., headed the NAACP's Washington office and served as a key adviser to President Lyndon B. Johnson on civil rights issues. His brother's wife, Juanita Jackson Mitchell,

was the first black female lawyer in Maryland and advised three presidents. Together, the Mitchell brothers were considered the black Kennedys because of their tireless devotion to public service.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, who now holds the seat Mitchell once held, eulogized him as a remarkable man who engendered respect by "constantly building bridges - while tearing down the walls that had excluded them," reported The Associated Press.

To the Baltimore Times, Cummings described Mitchell as "a true servant leader, never concerning himself about fame or fortune but, rather, devoting himself entirely to uplifting the people he represented."

USA Today's Dewayne Wickham, who was a young father struggling to support his family when he worked in Mitchell's office in the early 1970s, remembered his former boss for his personal acts of heroism as well as his public service.

"Heroes can be measured in ways large and small. They can be gauged by the achievements gained in a life of public service - by the deeds done under the scrutiny that comes to those who chose to live their lives in a political fishbowl. By this yardstick, Mitchell was a remarkable man," Wickham wrote.

"But while it is harder to chronicle, heroes can also be found among those whose humanitarian acts are rendered beyond the prying eyes of television cameras, or the probing questions of newspaper reporters. It is this way that I and many others came to know him - I'll remember him as a man who stood tall with presidents, but stooped low to teach a young father and budding journalist the power of words - and the importance of conviction," Wickham wrote.

Since Parren Mitchell first joined together with fellow "Goon Squad" members to fight injustice in Baltimore, much has changed there and elsewhere. Now, not only do blacks have the right to freely eat at their local greasy spoon, they have the right to own it, if they so desire.

Even so, as Mitchell observed, the struggle for equality is far from over.

"There's no getting off that train. You can't say, 'I've put five years in fighting racism and now I'm finished.' No, you are not finished. Our job is to fight it every day, to continue to shove it down and when it rises up to shove it down even harder," Mitchell said in a 1989 speech before the Baltimore teachers union, said a recent story by The Associated Press.

Mitchell put a foot in the door for blacks in the world of government contracting and business. Now, it's the black community's turn to take advantage of the opportunities he secured to show that his sacrifices weren't made in vain.

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