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WDAS-AM: A PIONEERING AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICE IN PHILADELPHIA, PA

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OF PENNSYLVANIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, October 18, 2007

Mr. FATTAH. Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize and memorialize WDAS-AM, a pioneering radio station in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for its extraordinary and historic acts of cultural, spiritual and political bravery. This organization has stood for the causes of freedom and justice in helping secure the civic and human rights of African Americans and deserves the recognition and thanks of this body. The momentous victories of the civil rights and protest movements, aided by WDAS, led the United States on a new path recognizing the human dignity of all people and sparking the modern movements for the rights of women, Native Americans, Hispanics and other historically disenfranchised people.

Although WDAS in its historic role is effectively gone, the station's phenomenal impact on my hometown and our nation is a story that should be told. I am sharing, for the record, a letter I received from Wynne Alexander, a Philadelphian who is both a historian of WDAS and the daughter of a station co-founder. I believe her words are helpful in understanding this remarkable story.

In 1951, Dr. Max M. Leon and Bob Klein undertook a revolutionary endeavor, instituting one of the nation's first Black Radio stations, WDAS-AM of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This industry-leading broadcast facility had a galvanizing social impact in our state, and in fact, across this country. This was not just a radio station, it was a cultural institution bringing its listeners aspects of every known societal necessity from award winning news coverage, to the finest musical programming, to governmental and religious affairs.

Thanks to their pioneering actions, station WDAS-AM was eventually joined by other such stations. But none was ever more effective in standing for justice and encouraging enlightenment both locally and nationally. Because of its unique position and timing, its contributions to the causes of freedom and justice make WDAS-AM the premiere Black station in the history of this country.

Dr. Leon and Mr. Klein did not do this in a time of peace and prosperity. It was a time of dangerous social upheaval. The realities of Jim Crow America were still very much alive in 1951, including racially motivated murders of social progressives, lynchings, segregated schools, housing, public transportation, drinking fountains, and certainly the majority of White shop owners did not want Black people shopping in their stores. This was the climate in which Leon and Klein found themselves having to change the minds of White, retail America, showing them and Madison Avenue the humanity, strength and beauty of the Black community. In their everyday actions, these two White men finessed, asked, implored and when necessary demanded that the rest of White Philadelphia and White America respect the Black community the way they did. What Max Leon did in allowing his young son-in-law to make this stand was an extraordinary act of courage and should go down as one of the greatest leaps of faith in the history of American Business.

WDAS was the only station to stand up for the rights of minority broadcasters, successfully suing Arbitron Industries, proving they were racist in their listenership accounting methods of America's minorities. In winning this class action judgment against Arbitron, WDAS paved the way for equality in the market place for all minority broadcasters and with the ensuing enhanced revenues, proved to all of corporate America the vitality and economic strength of the Black community.

By the mid 1950s, WDAS had established one of the first and only full service broadcast news departments providing major coverage of every civil rights breakthrough during a historic era in our nation's history. The newsroom was packed with cutting edge, highly talented journalists. WDAS was there bringing first hand reporting from Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education, Rosa Parks' refusal to take a back seat, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to the Little Rock, Arkansas riots, the Birmingham Church Bombings, the integration of Alabama University, Dr. King's marches on Washington D.C., his winning the Nobel Peace Prize, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. WDAS reporters and radio personalities covered every aspect, from the marches in the street to the presidential signatures at the White House.

WDAS was responsible for bringing Dr. King to Philadelphia, forging his alliance with NAACP president Cecil Moore, Esq. WDAS then sponsored a parade down Market Street in Philadelphia introducing Dr. King to the city. They also commissioned buses taking Freedom Riders to the South and supplied buses to take people to all of Dr. King's marches. WDAS' unprecedented and innovative programming efforts are also credited with keeping Philadelphia calm in the wake of King's assassination. Other cities expressed their anguish in violent riots. Philadelphia mourned their loss in the non-violent manner Dr. King always advocated.

In a letter written one year after King's assassination, King confidant and Ambassador Andrew Young said this about WDAS:

"For the past number of years WDAS and its manager Robert Klein have been of great service to Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. They have supported us editorially, financially, spiritually and with a great amount of their air time.....To our knowledge there is no station in America that has worked harder, longer and with more dedication for Black people than WDAS in Philadelphia."

Demonstrating its enormous cultural awareness and forward thinking, WDAS also made a broadcast home for Malcolm X. Very few, if any stations can make that claim and almost none of them welcomed both Dr. King and Malcolm X, during their lifetimes.

WDAS also celebrated a resounding victory against racism when it supported and partnered with Cecil Moore, Esq. in his victorious effort to integrate Girard College. This move was first advocated years earlier on the station's airwaves by revered Philadelphia Common Pleas Court Judge Raymond Pace Alexander.

For decades, WDAS was instrumental in leading, supporting and encouraging the various consciousness-raising and financial boycotts to curtail United States business involvement in South Africa until that government effectively fell, ending its racist policies.

Years earlier, WDAS was also the spearhead when Rev. Dr. Leon Sullivan launched his boycott against the Greyhound Bus Company in Philadelphia. Together they were successful in racially integrating the staff of drivers and personnel.

Rev. Sullivan and the Zion Baptist Church were not alone. From Bright Hope Baptist to the Church of the Advocate and many more stops in between, the "overground" railroad forged by WDAS performed major works of social progress in partnership with the leaders of every major church in Philadelphia and neighboring states as well. Their hands of partnership also extended to any and all of the smaller churches within that area.

WDAS held numerous "radiothons" raising money to benefit churches and people in need. One of the most famous of these broadcasts was a House of Umoja-inspired "life-a-thon"—a gun surrender program where gang members and others brought in their weapons and pledged themselves to the principles of non violence.

WDAS worked with hundreds of national and local social activists among them, Dick Gregory and Father Paul Washington helping to calm the city during the days after the King assassination. WDAS assisted a future national leader in youth awareness, Sister Falaka Fattah of the House of Umoja, who was strategizing and creating revolutionary ways of handling troubled young people in an extraordinary effort to stop the frightening gang warfare and fatalities gripping the city in 1969 and '70. Partnering with other exceptionally brave, strong, predominantly female social activists, WDAS News and the station's Public Affairs Departments helped dramatically cut those gang death statistics through a concerted effort of community outreach, special news reporting and social programs.

WDAS launched an anti-drug campaign in the early 1970s. The highly vaunted "Help A Junkie Bust A Pusher" program helped the station win one of its 13 Valley Forge Freedom Foundation Medals. Those medals were joined by scores of Associated Press Awards and recognition from other social, journalistic and governmental organizations dedicated to amelioration. The station's "Job Hunt" program, initiated at the height of a crippling recession and the editorial excellence of Jim Klash won the station the highly coveted Armstrong Award.

WDAS was also responsible for the legendary Freedom Shows where the finest Rhythm and Blues talent in the world was brought into Philadelphia for the benefit of worthy civil rights and social organizations. This amazing care and concern was also amplified by the station's award winning public affairs department.

WDAS was also the home of one of the first Black talk shows in the history of this country, the first in Philadelphia and probably the first show on the East Coast: The Listening Post, with Joe Rainey.

WDAS charities raised and distributed hundreds of thousands of pre-1980 dollars to thousands of people in the tri-state area, year after year.

WDAS also contributed to the enormous popularity of Rhythm and Blues music and helped elevate African American R & B artists. At a time when Black artists could not get their records played on White radio stations, at a time when Black radio talent could not get hired at White stations, at a time when Black artists were being paid as little as one tenth of what White artists were making, at a time when Black artists could not walk through the lobbies of the clubs in which they were appearing, WDAS forged an atmosphere of respect and reverence, creating quality showcasing for what was destined to become one of this country's greatest musical contributions to the world. The list of R & B stars helped by WDAS is hundreds of names long. The music history books note WDAS was the first in the country to play records by Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, The Beatles, Marvin Gaye, Buddy Holly, The Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder and Will Smith. WDAS also created jobs and respect for Black talent in every phase of broadcasting and radio production. Radio remained a very segregated industry well into the 1970s. WDAS not only gave opportunities to racial minorities, their staff of women on-the-air was equally impressive.

So let us recognize that this outpouring of caring concern, extraordinary strength, diligence and humanity brought about profound social changes which benefited an entire nation. This magnificent endeavor of amelioration allowed us to benefit from the gifts and talents of all of our people. Let this cultural institution be remembered for the beacon it was, lighting the way in times of need, and in so doing, inspiring similar visionary efforts for future generations to come.

I thank Ms. Alexander for sharing this story and commend the work of her father and all of the people involved in the laudable work done by WDAS-AM in Philadelphia over the years on behalf of our community, country and world. While there is certainly more work to be done, we would not have come this far without these brave and dedicated souls.