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ROLE REVERSAL

Keith Boykin again trades the political whirl for the writing life

by Bob Roehr

It's time in my life to move on," says Keith Boykin. "When I left my job at the White House [press office] in January 1995, I was committed to doing some writing. I did that for about eight months. I really want to get back to that."

Those eight months resulted in *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*, a well-received book now out in paperback.

Boykin's professional path veered, however, at the urging of his mentor, Phill Wilson, who encouraged Boykin to serve the community as executive director of the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum.

During the past two and a half years Boykin has guided the Leadership Forum's evolution from a Los Angeles-based group that staged a national conference into a full-fledged national organization.

He believes that over the years African American gay men and lesbians have become "less of an afterthought and more of an included part of the black community."

But there are frustrations.

"One of the biggest obstacles has been to try to instill a sense of faith in individuals who have been taught for so long that they had no reason to have faith in themselves and their institutions, particularly in the African American community," Boykin says.

He says getting people to come out is the greatest challenge.

"Whatever we do is dependent upon that. It's fine for people who are not out to make contributions anonymously, but in the end we are really creating a sense of empowerment. It's not just the money but actually a sense of visibility, a presence, a sense of being proud of who we are."

Boykin cites the church leaders "who regularly spew out homophobia from the pulpits [as] one of the biggest reasons why people don't come out in the black community, because they have been condemned, told that they are wrong and immoral."

He says, "We are not doing anywhere near enough in this community or any other community to challenge that."

Boykin is also very troubled by the HIV/AIDS crisis. While mortality rates are declining for most other population groups, they are not declining for African Americans. And of the 30 million people estimated to be infected worldwide, two-thirds of those are in sub-Saharan Africa.

"The black community, including the black leadership, has completely walked away from this issue. It is almost as if black people don't realize that black people are the primary victims of HIV and AIDS: the people who are most likely to die," he says. "Not just among gay men but among practically all of the segments of the population."

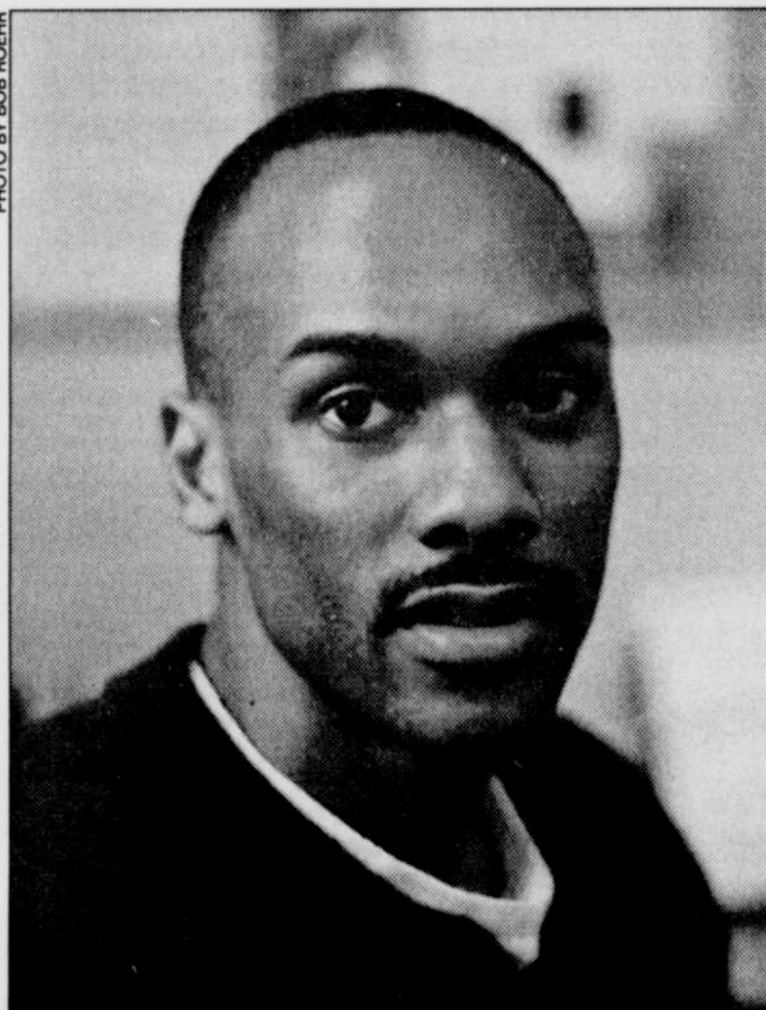
Boykin is leaving the Leadership Forum to return to writing and lecturing. He wants to talk about ideas, unencumbered by having to stop and think about the needs of an organization. He wants to branch out beyond gay and lesbian themes into broader topics.

The prospect of working on another presidential campaign, meanwhile, holds little appeal, and Boykin feels it is "far too early" to line up behind any potential candidate.

The suggestion that Boykin himself might someday run for office brings a nervous laugh.

"I'd like to be involved in public service, but I'm not sure at this point that I have the fire in my belly to endure the campaigning process," he says. "Or that I want to surrender the little bit of privacy that I do have and make myself essentially a servant of the people."

■ The NATIONAL BLACK LESBIAN AND GAY LEADERSHIP FORUM CONFERENCE is scheduled to be held Feb. 12-15 at the Crystal City Hyatt in Washington, D.C. Complete conference information is available on the forum's Web site at www.nblglf.org, or by contacting coordinator Kenyatta Graves at (202) 483-6786.



Keith Boykin

He disappointed many last fall when he decided not to renew his two-year contract. But he did agree to stay on for an orderly transition through the group's annual conference in February.

The Leadership Forum offices, which are housed on the second floor of a rehabbed warehouse, are elegant in a sparse, understated way. The ceilings are high and there is a homey warmth, perhaps due in part to Boykin's gracious ease. His voice is a mix of fire and honey, optimism and excitement, which is tempered by experience with just how difficult it can be to make things happen.

The accomplishments that Boykin is most proud of during his tenure are perhaps the ones least visible to folks on the outside. It's the stuff of organization building. The board of directors is stronger, and the roles of staff and volunteers have been clearly defined. A decade of red ink has been wiped away.

"We have been able to raise a significant amount of money for the first time," he beams.

And there is heightened public visibility through the Leadership Forum's participation in the Million Man March and Boykin's travel to Zimbabwe as part of a U.S. delegation.