

NATIONAL news

FINDING A PLACE IN THE MOVEMENT

Gays embraced, then excluded from Million Man March commemoration

by Bob Roehr

Leaders of the black queer community were shocked and dismayed at the roller coaster of reconciliation and inclusion, then the last-minute rejection of their participation in the Millions More Movement event Oct. 15 on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

The rally served to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Million Man March and reinvigorate community empowerment. This time the Rev. Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam had the support of many other leaders of the African-American community who had shunned the earlier gathering.

In February, Farrakhan publicly welcomed the participation of gays and lesbians in activi-

ties, but a series of communications between the Millions More Movement and queer leaders resulted in little progress toward that end. There was a further setback in July when the Rev. Willie Wilson, executive director of the event, made what many considered to be inflammatory remarks about queers while preaching at his church in D.C.

The National Black Justice Coalition took Farrakhan to task at a news conference Oct. 11 for continuing to exclude them from the event. That resulted in an Oct. 12 meeting with him and Wilson.

"Rev. Wilson was a huge obstacle. He refused to shake our hands when we walked in; he yelled and screamed the whole time," said coalition president Keith Boykin. "Minister Farrakhan was very understanding, polite and respectful."

Coalition executive director H. Alexander Robinson continued: "We had a very good conversation with Minister Farrakhan on a wide range of issues that we share. At the end of the meeting it was Rev. Wilson that suggested that Keith be the speaker, and Minister Farrakhan agreed."

Boykin added: "We showed up at 8 a.m.

[Oct. 15] to get VIP credentials for me, Alexander and Donna [Payne, coalition vice president and a field organizer for the Human Rights Campaign], and they didn't have any for any of us. We were escorted to the stage area to talk with Sister Claudette Muhammad, who was our liaison to Farrakhan."

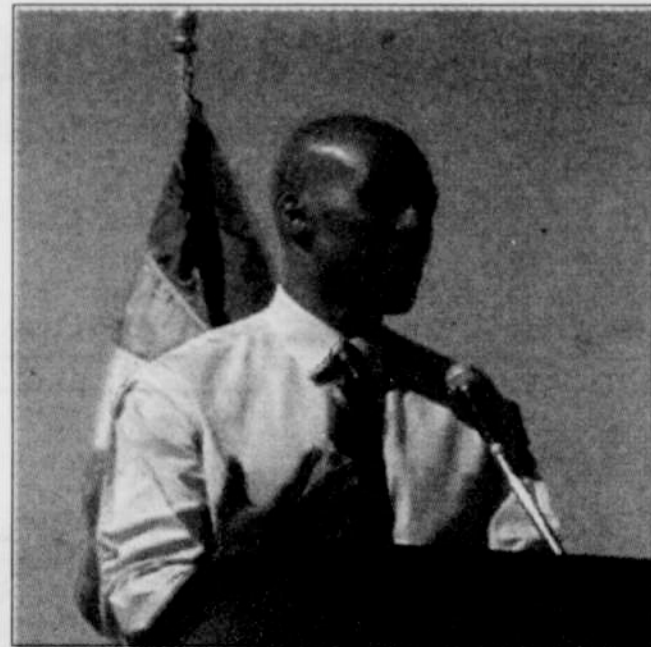
Payne said: "Rev. Wilson came over and said to me, 'You will not be speaking.' He had a smirk on his face." Wilson claimed the group had not responded in time, and he walked off.

The National Black Justice Coalition and the D.C. Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays had organized a rally as part of the We Are Family Unity Weekend. They gathered that morning, a few blocks away at Freedom Plaza, prior to marching to the Mall.

"Rev. Willie Wilson is a snake in the grass, and he must learn that his ignorance, arrogance and back-stabbing will not be tolerated," Sterling Washington, co-chairman of the D.C. coalition, told the rally. "If he wants a fight, then a fight he will get."

Bishop Zachary G. Jones of Unity Fellowship Church in New York City said: "In my family, I know that when those heterosexual couples have their little problems, and they need somebody within the family to kind of bridge the gap, and they need the gay uncle to participate with financial support, they know how to pick up the phone. That's the inside voice."

Boykin was the last to speak. He said, "This has been a challenging week, and yet, we are still not defeated." He added that the point of his prepared speech was to get beyond the past.



National Black Justice Coalition president Keith Boykin speaks at an event commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Million Man March.

"Today, because of one person, we are unable to do that."

Boykin profusely praised Farrakhan's recent acts and statements of inclusion. He said, "The diversity of speakers assembled here today is a powerful signal that we in the black community will not allow ourselves to be divided by differences of opinion, religion, gender, class or sexual orientation ever again."

He raised the names of Bayard Rustin, Billy Strahorn, Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde and Alvin Ailey as having added much to both the black and gay communities through their work. He said: "That's why I am here today—to honor their legacy. We share the same goals and aspirations of the rest of the black community, but none of us can accomplish those goals without unity and courage." □

BOB ROEHR is a free-lance reporter based in Washington, D.C.



After initially being welcomed by the Rev. Louis Farrakhan, queer participants in the Millions More March were denied access to the podium.

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