

Afro-Nicaraguans' Story Told



Dr. Mildred McClain-Coleman

Photo by Richard J. Brown

by Nyewusi Askari

When Dr. Mildred McClain-Coleman visited Portland last week, she brought a very clear and urgent message: "It is crucial that African-Americans and other Third World people become more involved in what is happening in Nicaragua."

She also brought a message from the people of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: "We are Black people of Nicaragua. We are Afro-Nicaraguans and we are praying that our Brothers and Sisters in North America will do all they can to end this war against our children. We want to raise our children in peace."

For many Americans, the mention of Afro-Nicaraguans generates confusion and disbelief. They want to know where they came from. How long have they been there? And are they any relations to Afro-Americans? The same kind of confusion is generated when Americans discover Black people living in Cuba, Minas Geraes, Bahia, Mexico, Columbia, and Hispaniola.

To understand this Black presence in Latin America, Central America, and in other parts of the western world, it is necessary to step back in time: a time when, in 1493, by a Papal Bull, "the New World was divided between Spain and Portugal."

- In 1501, a royal ordinance gave official sanction to introducing African slaves into Spanish colonies;
- In 1502, Portugal landed her first cargo of slaves from Africa in Hispaniola;
- Between 1502 and 1600, 900,000 enslaved Africans were brought to Latin America;
- In 1513, The Spanish Real Cedula permitted the transfer of slaves to Cuba. Between 1513 and 1865, Cuba imported 527,828 slaves from Africa, 60,000 of whom were brought in between 1513 and 1763.

History documents that the present day Afro-Nicaraguans who live on the southern Atlantic coast of that country are the descendants of African slaves from the southern part of America and Jamaica. Their communities bear names which are hardly known in this country, but Dr. Coleman knows them well: Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, La Fe, Orinoco and Marshall Point.

Dr. Coleman is convinced that the Reagan Administration's efforts to overthrow the Sandinista government threatens the very existence of Afro-Nicaraguans in Nicaragua.

"There are thousands of Black people that live throughout Central America. Having traveled to Nicaragua for the past year and a half, I can certainly say that if the United States invades Nicaragua, it would come through the Atlantic Coast. So the United States would have to first attack those Black communities on the Atlantic Coast to get to the Pacific Coast side. If a situation like this happened, it would pit African-American soldiers against other Third World people and Black people who look just like them. They will find themselves killing Black people: young Black children, women, and grandmothers and grandfathers.

"It's no mistake that a great proportion of the U.S. military is made up of Black and Third World troops, given the condition of the economy right now. Many of these young people feel that they don't have a choice but to join the military. However, they go without knowing that what they will be confronted with is fighting their own kind.

"Nicaragua is involved in a revolutionary process right now: a process which is very important to the survival of Afro-Nicaraguans. The government recently passed what is called "The Autonomy Plan." The plan allows for Blacks and Indians who live on the Atlantic Coast to keep their language, culture and religion. In other words, the Brothers and Sisters will not lose their identity. They will continue to exist as whole communities linked by heritage and custom."

Still, Dr. Coleman says, they are suffering from the evils of war. The struggle for power between the Contras and the Sandinistas has, in some ways, divided those Afro-Nicaraguans who have yet to decide where their loyalties lie. Many have been told that if they join the Contras, they will be guaranteed a lifestyle equal to that of mainland Americans. Nevertheless, most have remained neutral.

Dr. Coleman worries about the children. "These children are in the same position as the children in South Africa. Just as we are concerned about children all over the world, we too should be concerned about the many children that are bearing the brunt of the war in Nicaragua. I am talking about the cost of the war. Not only are they victims of the confrontation, they are the ones being kidnapped; they are the ones being taken to fight for the Contras. We are talking about young children who are forced to leave their families. Above all, we know that these children are forced to fight against their own communities."

To listen to Dr. Coleman speak is to realize that we average Americans know very little about what is really going on in Nicaragua. She believes, as do other African-Americans who have traveled to Nicaragua, that Black people in the U.S. are not speaking out because of a lack of understanding of what is at stake.

"Once we understand that the Contras are merely Nicaraguans who are being paid by the United States to fight other Nicaraguans called the Sandinistas; when we understand that a Contra is often just a Nicaraguan who is dissatisfied, and when you offer a dissatisfied person a pair of boots, a gun and some pocket change, you can get them to do just about anything; once we understand that Afro-Nicaraguans are part of our roots, then we can organize to help end this senseless war.

Dr. Coleman, Harvard-educated and well-known Atlanta-based activist, was invited to Oregon by Witness for Peace. Her stay in Portland was coordinated by Richard Brown, who himself traveled throughout Nicaragua; and Avel Gordly of American Friends Service Committee.

Dr. Coleman's travels have taken her to Africa, Europe, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and she has done extensive travel in North America. Based on her dedication to bringing the Afro-Nicaraguan message to Black communities everywhere, we can expect her to grace our community again . . . soon.

If you want to know more about the Atlantic Coast or want to get involved, contact: Richard J. Brown, 289-0707; or Avel Gordly, 230-9427.



Coretta Scott King congratulates filmmaker Richard Attenborough

Filmmaker Congratulated

Coretta Scott King congratulates filmmaker Richard Attenborough after he received a standing ovation at the Congressional Black Caucus' special screening of his upcoming feature "Cry Freedom" in Washington, D.C.

"Cry Freedom" is the true story of slain South African black activist Stephen Biko, played by Denzel Washington with Kevin Kline as the white newspaper editor Donald Woods, who was declared a banned person in his South African homeland because of his association with Biko. The film chronicles their enlightening friendship, Biko's untimely death and Woods' narrow escape from South Africa.

For the past ten years, Woods, along with his wife and five children, has lived in London. He has written two books about Biko's life and death, and has dedicated his life to the struggle to end apartheid.

"Cry Freedom" is a Universal Pictures presentation of a Richard Attenborough Film, starring Kevin Kline, Penelope Wilton and Denzel Washington. Produced and directed by Richard Attenborough, the screenplay is by John Briley, based on the books "Biko" and "Asking For Trouble" by Donald Woods. "Cry Freedom" is scheduled for release in November.

The Public Safety In Parks Task Force to Hold Meeting

The meeting will be on Thursday, November 19th, 7:00 p.m. at Benson High School, 546 N.E. 12th in the Auditorium.

The Task Force seeks public comments and recommendations on the following issues:

What are the most important park safety/security concerns? Should parks create a Park Ranger Unit and/or hire private security? Should there be a city-wide ban on alcohol in parks? Can parks make a crime prevention impact by increasing the number of supervised playgrounds during the summer? Should city parks close earlier? Are parks and community centers adequately lit?

Public input is not limited to the above questions. The Task Force wants to know what else citizens are worried about and what ideas citizens may have. Written comments can be submitted to: Public Safety in Parks Task Force, Office of Commissioner Mike Lindberg, 1220 S.W. 5th, Portland, OR 97204.

The Public Safety in Parks Citizen's Task Force is responsible for examining the issues mentioned above and making recommendations to Commissioner Mike Lindberg by January 11th.

Portland Public Schools Offer Parenting Classes

Metropolitan Portland parents may attend free classes dealing with child-rearing concerns at some Portland Public Schools during the next two months.

All classes deal with popular concerns and issues and instructors allow ample time for questions and discussions.

Most classes are lead by counselors working in schools serving students in kindergarten to Grade 5.

Portland Public Schools' parenting classes are offered by the Child Development Specialist Program which provides specialized counseling to primary-age children and their parents.

For more information, contact: Roselyn Taylor or Susan Isaacs, program coordinators, 280-5790; or Bill Garbett, director of public information and communication, Portland Public Schools, 249-3304.

Court Watch Group Follows Van Guilder Jr. Case

A group of neighbors and business people from Northeast Portland who have actively followed the court case of convicted burglar Harry Van Guilder Jr., will travel downtown once again to listen to Van Guilder Jr.'s sentencing on more burglary charges.

Beaumont-Wilshire Court Watch, with representatives from Beaumont-Wilshire Neighborhood Association and Beaumont Business Association, has invited City Commissioner Bob Koch to join in to listen to sentencing from Multnomah County District Court Judge Phillip Roth at 2 p.m. Tuesday, November 17, 1987, in Room 538 of the County Courthouse.

"I am delighted to see people taking an active interest in the criminal justice system," said Koch, "and to working in a positive way to make it better for all of us."

The Court Watch group has been following the case since Van Guilder Jr.'s first arrest for burglary in November 1985; he was convicted and sentenced to six months in jail. After release, he was arrested earlier this year and is now awaiting sentencing for 12 theft and burglary charges.

Characteristic of the Court Watch effort, group members will travel downtown on a rented bus displaying neighborhood and business group signs.

An estimated 50 people are expected to attend, traveling from Northeast 37th and Skidmore (near Wilshire Park) to the 4th Avenue entrance of the County Courthouse, 1021 S.W. 4th Ave.

After sentencing, Deputy District Attorney David B. Peters will explain the legal proceedings and answer questions from the citizens attending.

Jobs, Public Safety Top Priority For New Koch Budget

Economic development and public safety were the top priorities as City Commissioner Bob Koch gathered with the bureau chiefs from the Department of Public Utilities, which he oversees, in a budget goal-setting session Oct. 27.

Each administrator shared individual ideas for work plans about these priorities and brainstormed new ideas. Koch said the meeting "represents progressive-thinking team management approach to doing business."

Koch described the session as "highly productive. When I took office I said I wanted to work toward less crime and more jobs. That's exactly what we're doing."

Economic development and public safety were on the "top five" list of goals for the City Council in its February retreat. Koch said by concentrating on the two topic areas for an entire day "we were able to come up with projects we can start in this budget year."

- Ideas discussed at the meeting included:
 - A youth employment/education incentive program for summer workers employed by the Water Bureau. It would allow youths to be paid an additional \$1 an hour over minimum wage if they stayed in school for the entire school year.

Foster Home Applications for the N. Portland Area Being Accepted

Lutheran Family Service, Unaccompanied Minors Program, is currently receiving applications for Foster Care Homes. Homes for young people coming from refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Financial assistance and social work support is provided by the State of Oregon and Lutheran Family Service.

Two sibling groups from Vietnam are arriving. One group is a girl, age 16 and her brother, age 12. The other group is an uncle, age 15 and his nephew, age 8. Also arriving is a Vietnamese boy, age 15 and a Laotian boy, age 17. These young people are arriving in September and October.

These young people need families and individuals who can provide the emotional support, love and guidance necessary to become members of our American communities.

People in the N. Portland area are encouraged to apply to be foster parents.

If you think you can give one of these young people a beginning in our country, please call Ned Landis, Lutheran Family Service, 605 S.E. 39th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214, 231-7480.

Class Teaches CPR For Infants and Toddlers

Specialized training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, CPR, specially designed for infants and toddlers is being taught at Emanuel Hospital & Health Center.

The course is taught at Emanuel by a registered nurse who specializes in the care of infants and toddlers. The other topics covered in this certified class include preventive safety measures and first aid. Hands-on experience is provided by the use of resusci-baby and resusci-toddler. Emanuel has the only resusci-toddler in the state.

To register for the class, call the Community Health Education Department at Emanuel, 280-4284.

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