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The Portland Observer 43

'City of Roses'



Volume XLIII
Number 27



www.portlandobserver.com
Wednesday • July 10, 2013

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Community Luminary

Paul Knauls celebrates 50 years of Portland memories

BY DONOVAN M. SMITH
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Paul Knauls is a businessman, longtime activist for the community, and the unofficial "Mayor of North and Northeast Portland," but if you ask him, he is simply "Paul Knauls."

The 82-year-old luminary celebrated 50 years in business over the July 4th weekend, when he joined family and friends for food and live soul music at his Geneva's Shear Perfection barber and beauty salon on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Knauls has undoubtedly left his mark on the city forever.

His life followed a trajectory quite normal for black Americans of the era. He was raised in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and for a time worked as a bell-boy at a country club during his teenage years. It was here where an already existing desire for a self-sustained business career burned even hotter.

"There were all these rich white people, and they'd come in with fur coats and all these cars and everything and I thought man, all I'm doing is checking coats and hats. So I asked a gentleman how do I get lots of money like you?" Knauls recalled.

That man told the young and bright-eyed teen that owning a business was the best route to go. Knauls faithfully followed that advice, but before the dream became reality, he would first graduate from high school in 1949 and enlist in the Air Force as an office machine repairman during the Korean War.

After 3 1/2 years of military service he was honorably discharged upon which he found himself working as a typewriter-repairmen by day and wine steward by night at the Davenport Hotel in Spokane. He never lost sight of his dream to own a business; between the two jobs he worked feverishly, and eventually, saved up enough money to move to Portland.

The Rose City quickly became a catalyst for the war veteran's success. By the early 1960s, a string of nightclubs popped up on the city's north and northeast side and Knauls got ownership of the establishments along with the woman he fell deeply in love with, his wife of 48 years, Geneva Knauls.

The names of those clubs were The Famous Cotton Club, Paul's, and Geneva's Restaurant and Lounge.

"If you talk to some of older people they'll remember all of those spots," he said.

Each club became staples in the city's African-American nightlife scene. It was not uncommon for black celebrities to pass through one of Knauls' venues when in town. Singer and dancer Sammy Davis Jr., former World Heavyweight Champion Joe Louis, and Light Heavyweight Champion Archie Moore are just a few of the stars that were on the scene at his establishments.

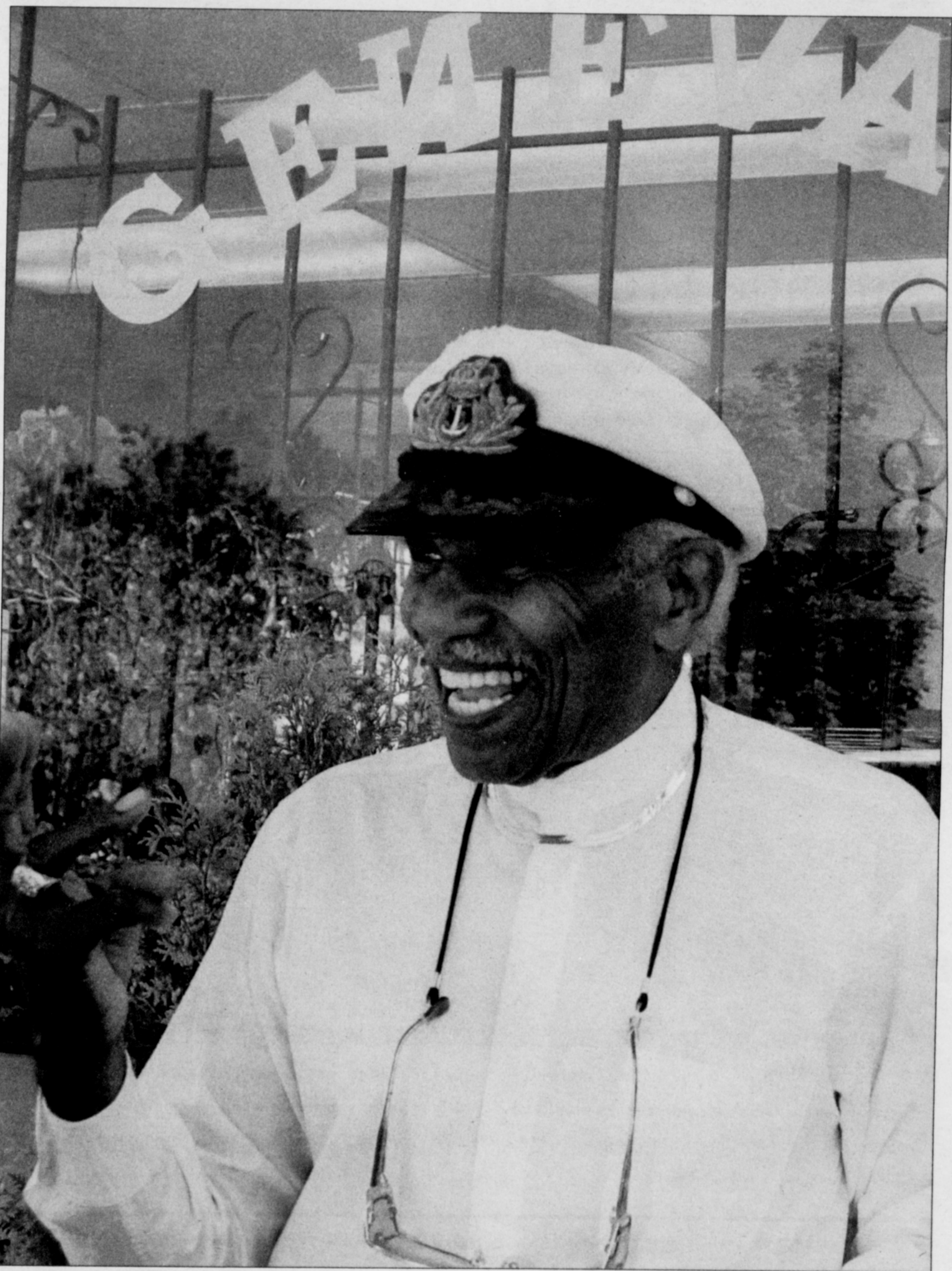


PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Paul Knauls, the 82-year-old luminary known for his promotion of Portland's African-American community, is celebrating 50 years of operating a business in the city. He and his wife Geneva, operate Geneva's Shear Perfection on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

The nightclub business couldn't last forever though.

"A good club will run about 7 years that's about it, the crowd grows up, the crowd comes in, everybody is happier, and their kids hear them talking about how nice it is, and the kids start coming and the parents look around like, god, I

don't want my kids in here," he says with a huge laugh.

As the older crowd began leaving, a new generation of young people began flocking to his clubs, and they lost the

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