

# **On the Case for 50 Years: A Brief History of The National Association of Human Rights Workers**

**By Fred Cloud**

The Struggle for human rights is centuries old. A milestone in the Western world was the adoption of the Magna Carta, which guaranteed certain civil and political liberties to the English people. It was not granted out of the goodness of the ruler's heart; rather, the great charter" was forced on King John by the English barons at Runnymede on June 15, 1215.

Fredrick Douglas, an eloquent advocate for abolition of slavery in the United States, may have had this fact in mind when he stated: Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will...Men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get.

As the twentieth century began, W.E.B. Du Bois-a graduate of both Fisk and Harvard - organized a lecture series at Atlanta University on African American history and life. He was appalled by the 1,700 lynching of Black Americans that had occurred between 1885 and 1894. In July 1905, Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter held a secret meeting in Niagra Falls, Ontario, with 29 other men and organized the Niagra Movement. Their agenda: Get America to enforce the Constitution, including the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments.

A year later-on September 22-24, 1906-White violence resulted in the Atlanta Massacre, in which White police supported the White mob. That same violent spirit was expressed two years later-in August 1908-when a White mob in Springfield, Illinois, killed and wounded dozens of Blacks in the Springfield Massacre.

Concerned Whites and Blacks - including W.E.B. Du Bois - issued a call on February 12, 1909, for "a national conference on the race problem." Three months later (on May 30, 1909), about 300 people gathered in New York City and formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

This brief recounting of history prior to the 1940s is intended to put America's troubled experience in race relations in historical context. The period of World War II and its aftermath was one of social ferment in America. Persons in the armed forces had moved around from one section of the country to another during the war years, and social mobility was accelerated as companies sent employees from city to city as part of their promotion policy. Social mores and race relations that had changed little for a generation were being questioned and challenged.

In this new social climate, a number of cities established human relations commissions. The first-or least the forerunner of the human relations commission-was the Detroit Mayor's Interracial Peace Committee, established on June 21, 1943, following the Detroit riot.

Looking back on that period some forty years later, George Schemer wrote: 1

Following the racial turmoil that almost paralyzed Detroit in 1942 and 1943, the mayor appointed an interracial Peace Committee to try to bring about improved relations between Whites and Blacks. The mayor and City Council did not speak of rights or correcting the practices of discrimination that prevailed at that time. They had only one concern-to establish peace and order and avoid conflict.

The city provided a small appropriation-enough to pay the salaries of a director, assistant director, and secretary. The director, a White male, prominent as a church layman, had no experience in the arena of race relations and provided little creative leadership. The assistant director was a well-qualified social worker, highly respected in both the Black and White communities. However, the committee quickly became embroiled in internal controversy, the director failed to develop a program and the assistant director was unable to move into the breach.

Within a year the mayor recognized that the committee had served no purpose and that tensions were again rising to a dangerous level. He discharged the first committee and the director and appointed a smaller group of nine, five of whom were the chief executive officers of city agencies. The committee then began a search for a new director. A number of influential community leaders recommended to the mayor and committee that I was asked to assume the responsibility as director of the restructured committee. I was highly challenged by the prospect but had many reservations. After much soul-searching, I agreed to accept the offer. I started the new job in June 1945, and served until 1952.

My approach was to involve representatively of key civic, minority, religions, and labor groups in a process of consultation to try to reach a consensus-a process which led me into contact with a broad spectrum of community leadership.

Within months, our office began to receive inquires from other cities concerning our policies, objectives, and activities. Our staff consisted of me as director, an assistant director, two community relations workers, and an office secretary,

The inquiries we were receiving from other cities soon developed into a communication network. By early 1947, we as staff developed the idea that all of us could learn much and greatly strengthen our role if we could meet our counterparts in other cities. We invited the staffs of the nine agencies we knew about to meet us in Detroit, in April 1947. The directors of the nine agencies

(Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, New York, St. Paul and Seattle) all participated and in several instances were accompanied by one or more staff members.

We met for three days. We found that we shared much in common in terms of the problems we had to deal with and our general goals and objectives. Our discussions ranged far and wide. Our one decision of lasting importance was that we should take the initiative to promote a national conference of those professionally engaged in the broad arena of interracial, interethnic, inter-religious relations, civil rights and minority group concerns, with the longer range objective of forming a national organization which could as a network for the exchange of information and the development of professional standards.

We formed a committee of three to visit the National Council on Race Relations, a newly created agency funded by the Rosenwald Foundation with offices in the vicinity of the University of Chicago. We were warmly received by the council officers and staff. They readily agreed to sponsor the conference and provided sufficient funds and staff services. A conference was scheduled for November 1947, to be held at International House., located at the edge of the University. Invitations were sent to every public, private, and voluntary agency in any way involved in promoting better relations among racial, ethnic, and religious groups, or concerned with equal opportunity and civil rights.

At least 200 persons, broadly representative of those invited, participated. We had an exciting conference. It was an enthusiastic group, exuding confidence that we were on the threshold of a new era in human relations and human rights.

The NCCR sponsored the founding conference in Chicago in 1947, on the condition that membership should include people from private as well as public agencies, at all levels – national, regional, state, and local. The name adopted by the founding members was the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials (NAIRO). It was incorporated in Illinois, and George Schermer was elected as the president, serving in 1947-48.

Presidents of NAIRO for the next ten years were: Tom Wright, Frank Baldeau, Maurice Fagin, Harold A. Lett, Charles Livermore, Herman Long, Marshall Bragdon, John Field, Arnold Aronson, and Margaret Garrity – NAIRO's first female president.

### **MOVING INTO THE 1960s**

Burton Levy has written that "The ten-year period from 1958 to 1967 was characterized by federal, state, and local laws and ordinances establishing civil rights agencies. These laws, most providing a modicum of enforcement power to investigate and resolve cases of racial discrimination, is indication of the change from prejudice to discrimination in the problem orientation of the nation. During

this time, public civil rights agencies continued to maintain a positive work and ideological relationship with the private minority group sector. "2

Levy further points out that "the Civil rights Act of 1957 was the first federal civil rights legislation during the twentieth century. The primary feature of the 1957 act was the empowering of the federal government to seek court injunctions against deprivation or obstruction by local authorities of the right to vote. The 1960 Civil Rights Act amended the 1957 act with respect to voting rights by authorizing judges to appoint referees to help Negroes register and vote. The Act also provided criminal penalties for bombings and bombing threats." 3

NAIRO's presidents during this second decade included: Fredrick B. Routh, George Culbertson, Lloyd Davis, Edward Rutledge, Alexander J. Allen, Kenneth C. Jones, John Hope II, John A. Buggs, and Galen Martin.

Lloyd Davis, who served as president during 1961-62 and again during 1968-69, saw 1961-62 as "a time of possibilities and great expectations." John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as president of the United States on January 20, 1961. Shortly prior to that, in late 1960, NAIRO had published a special publication entitled: Executive Responsibility in Intergroup Relations, to which a number of persons (including Davis) had contributed. It was presented to President John F. Kennedy by a delegation of NAIRO leaders. The NAIRO report was used by the president and his staff as a guide for organizing intergroup relations services throughout the executive branch of the federal government. Davis states that "promoting the recommendations contained in the NAIRO report became a priority of my Administration."

### **INTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

NAIRO not only served human rights professionals already in the field, it also took the lead in recruiting and training them. In 1957, the Fund for the Republic provided a matching grant of \$100,000 to intergroup relations agencies. This was to help underwrite one-year internships for junior professionals in the field. The funds were awarded to NAIRO, which administered the program.

NAIRO administered this National Internship Program for three years (1957-60) under the leadership of its Educational and Professional Training Committees. John V.P. Lasso, Jr. served as coordinator for three years. During those years, 28 agencies participated, located from New York to California and from Boston to Atlanta. Some 35 persons received training between 1957 and 1960.

In 1963, the Eleanor Roosevelt Memorial Foundation enabled NAIRO to resume the internship program, and by 1965, 75 more trainees had been brought into the field. During this period, 49 agencies participated, including both city and state human rights commissions and various religious and interfaith committees.

## **GROWTH OF NAIRO/NAHRW AS AN ORGANIZATION**

During its first three years, NAIRO “was largely underwritten by grants from the Council on Race Relations, which also provided an executive director, Louis E. Hosch. After 1950, it was sustained by membership dues, with grants from agencies for special projects and sometimes for general support.” 4

John V.P. Lasso was NAIRO’s first paid executive director, being appointed in 1957. He established an office in New York City. Frederick B. Routh (who served as president in 1959-60) succeeded Lasso in 1962 and served with enthusiasm and effectiveness until 1969. During Routh’s years of service, NAIRO maintained an office in Washington, D.C. at 2027 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. From there, he issued a bimonthly Newsletter.

The closing of NAIRO’s Washington office and the reluctant release of its executive director was strictly a matter of economics. Membership dues were inadequate to underwrite the operation, and foundations were unwilling to provide money for “maintenance costs.” So the board of directors decided (with much emotional anguish) to have the “national office” rotate to the “home city” of the current President. This has been the practice of NAHRW since 1970 - the year the organization’s name was changed to the “National Association of Human Rights Workers.”

At the time of the transition, NAIRO was several thousand dollars in debt. President Jack D. Middleton (who served during 1970-71) led a financial drive, appealing to “Friends of NAIRO,” that retires the indebtedness. Attorney Wiley Branton gave his services without charge to prevent lawsuits while NAIRO/NAHRW was getting on financially solid ground.

Presidents of NAHRW during the 1970s, in addition to Jack D. Middleton, were: Alfred Cowles, Fred Cloud, Wendell J. Royce, Ruth G. Schechter, William R. Jessup, Leonardo A. Chappelle, Delores L. Rozzi, J. William Becton, and Larry Groth.

In 1972-73, Fred Cloud used the fact that he was simultaneously president of NAHRW and vice chairman of IAOHRA (International Association of Official Human Rights Agencies) to get the two organizations to sponsor a human rights training conference for professionals from agencies in twelve Southern states. A grant from the Ford Foundation, channeled through the Southern Regional Council, enabled 65 delegates to have an intensive week-long training experience at the University of Georgia, staffed by top-flight leadership from EEOC, HUD, CRS, and CRC. Two delegates to that conference – William R. Jessup and J. William Becton- subsequently served as president of NAHRW. There are other indications, also, that the Training Conference gave a “big boost” to human rights work in the South.

## **THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONFERENCES TO HUMAN RIGHTS WORK**

NAIRO's annual national conferences were-at the outset-the only occasion which regularly brought together, from all over the nation, both volunteers and paid workers in the field of intergroup relations. Delegates to these conferences were from both public and private agencies, from all levels of government, and from a wide variety of disciplines, such as community organizations, law, education, social work, and industrial relations.

Special conferences have also been a part of NAIRO/NAHRW's activity which has contributed significantly to the development of human rights in America. Special conferences to date have included the following:

In 1954 and 1953, NAIRO and the University of Chicago sponsored two Conferences on Research in Intergroup Relations, financed by grants from the Field Foundation. These conferences brought selected groups of academic researchers and agency practitioners together on the university campus to review the findings of research and the needs of agencies for additional knowledge.

In 1954, NAIRO sponsored the first police community relations conference, attended by police from 27 cities and representatives of intergroup relations agencies. This meeting established the pattern for the annual police community relations institutes held in Michigan State University each spring.

In 1962, anticipating the president's Executive Order barring discrimination in the sale of federally-aided housing (signed on November 20, 1962), the Ford Foundation made a grant to NAIRO for a conference on Equal Opportunity in Housing, cosponsored by NAIRO and the National Housing Center. Housing industry leaders, government officials and specialists in intergroup relations met for three days in Princeton, New Jersey. The grant also provided for preparation of four special studies by members of NAIRO to be used as background material for the conference.

Ten years later, in 1972, Fred Cloud – then president of NAHWR – proposed an international consultation on the status of human rights. He appointed Edward Rutledge as chairman of NAHRW's International Human Rights Committee. That Committee reached out to IAOHRA in 1973 and they agreed to participate; John Ferron, Director of the Baltimore Community Relations Commission, was appointed to represent IAOHRA. The Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA) was also approached; in 1976, the full membership of CASHRA voted to participate in the consultation, and their president, Carole Geller, was named to represent them.

The three human rights organizations – NAHRW, IAOHRA, and CASHRA – formed a Joint Committee for International Consultations on Human Rights, and

designated as co-chairs of the committee Edward Rutledge, John Ferron, and Carole Geller. A planning committee was chosen, which had two major assignments: 1) to plan an agenda for the consultation; and 2) to secure an appropriate site. Fredrick B. Routh, former NAHRW president and executive secretary, was chosen as the secretariat for the consultation.

The place chosen was the National Conference Center in Ottawa. Six major issues were identified: Law Enforcement in the Democratic Society; Immigration and Emigration Policies and Practices; Multicultural Corporations; Affirmative Action; Political Participation of Minorities and Women; and Constituency Building by Public Agencies. Fifty persons – representing a wide range of skills and backgrounds – convened in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, on November 15-17, 1978, for the first International Consultation of Selected Human rights Professionals. The proceedings of the consultation were published as a special issue of the Journal of Intergroup Relations in the summer of 1980.

Four years later, on August 22-25, 1982, the Second International Consultation of Selected Human Rights Professionals was held in Baltimore, Maryland. The focus was on three emerging issues: Race, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations; Women's rights; and Migration, Emigration and Immigration. (Once again, the proceedings were published as a special issue of the Journal, Autumn 1984).

A sad note was that Fredrick B. Routh, who had functioned with great effectiveness as the secretariat for the Joint Committee for International Human rights Consultations, died of cancer on June 2, 1983, some nine months following the Second Consultation.

Routh was one of the first professionals in the human rights field, and had served as both president and executive secretary of NAHRW.

There was a marked difference of "climate" at the 1982 consultation. At the first consultation in Ottawa in 1978, emphasis on human rights was in a state of worldwide growth, the work of governments and of private individuals and organizations having been lent impetus by the human rights initiatives in Unites States foreign policy. The mood was upbeat. In Baltimore in 1982, however, human rights professionals faced economic times prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic, and agencies were being forced to tighten their budgetary belts. In the interim since the Ottawa consultation, large-scale racial violence had occurred in both British and American cities. The Regan administration had de-emphasized human rights in America foreign policy and was embroiled in extensive controversy regarding its support of domestic civil rights. Even so, the delegates discussed issues energetically and gained insights from one another.

NAHRW's President during its fourth decade were: James E. Clyburn, Judith Green, Richard D. Letts, James Chase, Leon W. Russell, and Marjorie L. Conner.

## YEARS OF LEADERSHIP WITHOUT A NATIONAL STAFF

For the past 27 years (since 1970), NAHRW has been providing that a national organization can survive, publish a Journal and a newsletter, put on good annual conferences, and make some gains in human rights even though it has no paid national staff persons. The national office moves to the “home city” of each new president.

Of course, there has been a price to pay. Someone has to do a lot of work to facilitate the day-to-day operation of a national human rights organization. Committees can do – and have done- much work, But ultimately, the enthusiasm and efforts of the president- and the amount of time he or she has been willing to put into NAHRW – has been a major factor in whether the Association has had a “good year” or a mediocre year.

Sometimes, presidents are called on to “go the second mile.” When Judith Green vacated the office of president in midterm (1981-82), President-Elect Richard D. Letts assumed the presidency and then served the following year (1982-83) also. That “volunteer spirit,” which was much appreciated by the entire membership, is what has enabled NAHRW to survive and grow. Two other functions which Dick Letts has performed for the association across the years are also greatly appreciated: he made a comprehensive photographic record of the annual conference; and he chaired the Past Presidents’ Luncheon annually.

The fifth decade of NAHRW’s life has been presided over by: Earl W. Williams, Gloria J. battle, John Roy Castillo, James Stowe, Sam Thomas III, Mary D. Snead and Leon Adams. During this decade, the membership decided that a one-year term of office for NAHRW’s President was too short to accomplish projected goals. So the bylaws were modified to call for two-year terms of office for the president, president elect, vice president, treasurer, and secretary. The first persons to serve a two year term were Mary Dunlap Snead (1993-95). She had a vigorous presidency. Reflecting on NAHRW’s activities during those two years, Snead wrote: 5

During 1994 and 1995, the board of directors and I worked to make sure that NAHRW had the recognition as a national leader in civil and human rights that it deserved.

NAHRW began in 1994 as one of three sponsors of the National Fair Housing summit in Washington, D.C. Following the summit, as president of NAHRW, I was invited to be a member of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s National Task Force to explore the new directions for Fair Employment Practice Agencies (FEPA). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) also invited me to be a member of their advisory committee. NAHRW also issued several public position statements on civil rights

issues, such as support of affirmative action and opposition to the legislative “Contract with America.”

## **A PROFESSIONAL LEVEL OF HUMAN RIGHTS TRAINING**

One of the significant developments in NAHRW’s ongoing life as an organization was the establishment of a Training Certification Program. Begun informally at the 1993 annual conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, it was launched formally in October 1994, at NAHRW’s annual conference in Knoxville, Tennessee. For years, there had been talk of a professional level of human rights training. Finally the first “Basic Skills Certification Program for Human Rights Workers” was initiated, during Mary Snead’s presidency. Co-chairpersons for the training committee were (and are) Louis Martin and Donald Burger.

As of October 1996, 18 persons had completed the training. According to Louis martin, co-chairperson of the training committee, “Since then more than 10 other persons have completed the training through Regional Conferences.” Further, Martin stated: 6 “We will be offering 37 different Leaders Institutes Skill Building Institutes, and Skill Building Workshops at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in Detroit, Michigan, October 14-19, 1997. These training programs comprise the core of our Basic and Master Skills Certification program curriculum.”

Although NAHRW is the prime sponsor of this professional training program, for the past three years (1995-97), IAOHRA has been a cosponsor of the training at the Southern Regional Conference. Also, according to Martin, “NAHRW has offered to train on-site professional human rights staffs at local and state levels – in Kentucky and Virginia, to date.”

Leon Adams, president of NAHRW during 1995-97, was quite supportive of this professional training program. The first certificates for those who had completed the program were presented at the 49<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Columbus, Ohio, on November 1, 1996.

During Adams’ presidency, NAHRW accomplished a good measure of financial achievement in its history – a \$70,000 profit for its treasury – occurred when the 49<sup>th</sup> annual conference was held in Adams’ home city of Columbus, Ohio. Further, that conference drew a record- breaking number of participants – nearly 500. Over the past two years, membership in NAHRW has increased between 18 and 20 percent.

## **THE JOURNAL OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS**

One of the strongest contributions rendered by NAIRO/NAHRW from its early years has been the Journal of Intergroup Relations. Begun in 1953 with “special reports,” it assumed quarterly publications in 1959. An examination of issues, across the years reveals solid articles on intergroup relations issues,

developments, theory, and practice. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of articles by human rights workers in Canada, Mexico, and other nations as well as persons throughout the United States. Current circulation includes readers in seven nations.

In 1975, NAHRW's board of directors authorized a study of the role that race plays in politics. Carried out over the next two years by NAHRW member Mary Warner, it was published by NAHRW under the title, Harassment of Minority Elected Officials. It attracted considerable public notice and was the basis for discussion of needed changes. Fifteen years later, it was revised and updated and published as a special issue of the Journal under the title, Harassment of African American Elected Officials (Fall 1991). The Prophetic Justice Unit of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA underwrote the publication of an extra 5,000 copies – the widest distributed the Journal has had to date.

Other special issues of the Journal have included such issues as: "The Americans With Disability Act of 1990" (Winter 1990-91); and "Economic Inequalities and Public Policy" (Winter 1996-97), which grew out of a national conference on that topic held at Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, on April 25, 1996.

Publications don't "just happen." The Journal was published as a high quality professional publication by J. Griffin Crump, who served as editor from 1970 to 1981; and Mansir Tydings, director of the Lincoln Foundation in Louisville, Kentucky, who was a tireless business manager. (In 1994, the Journal began awarding annual cash prizes for the best articles published each year; they are called the Mansir Tydings Award in his honor.) Crump was succeeded as editor by Gregory D. Squires (1981-84), Mary E. Davidson (1985-89), and Fred Cloud (1990 to the present time). Guidance and support for the Journal staff are provided by the editorial board and the advisory committee. The Journal is the only such publications published by a professional human rights organization. In 1997, its circulation passed the 1,000 mark.

## **A NATIONAL FOCUS ON RACIAL DIALOGUE**

President Clinton has called America to carry on meaningful dialogue on race relations. His call echoes other calls throughout the twentieth century – such as that issued on February 12, 1909, by W.E.B. DuBois and others; such as that issued by the mayor of Detroit following the 1943 race riots in that city. Most human relations commissions were created with a mandate for interracial dialogues. But they quickly found that "Institutional racism – entrenched racial preferences incorporated in usual ways of doing business – would not yield to dialogue alone. A practical answer to this dilemma was the passage of enforceable laws, especially in the areas of public accommodations, employment, and housing.

With a long-running problem like racism, perseverance is an absolute essential if a solution is to be found. Each new generation has to be educated to an attitude of inclusiveness and mutual respect. But dialogue alone is not enough. Action is imperative.

Americans have great ingenuity in solving problems- when they really want to do so. Racism will yield to brotherhood/sisterhood when, as, and if we really bring our collective minds, imaginations, and wills to bear upon the problem. Many of us believe that this is the most urgent item on our society's agenda as we near the twenty-first century. To be a human rights worker these days can be as challenging – and as exhilarating- as it was for George Schemer and the first members of NAIRO/NAHRW 50 years ago. We're on our way, and we won't turn back!

#### **FOOTNOTES**

1. Program Booklet for 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Pass Presidents' Luncheon, October 26, 1987.
2. Levy, Burton. "The Racial Bureaucracy, 1941-1971: From Prejudice to Discrimination to Racism."  
Journal of Intergroup Relations.  
Vol. II, No. 1 (July 1972), page 10.
3. Ibid; page 10.
4. From "Scope Note about NAIRO (1967)," page 1, in the archives of Amistad Research Center, Inc. New Orleans, LA. The author is deeply grateful for assistance from the center.
5. Letter to the author, dated June 2, 1997.
6. Long –distance phone conversation on September 3, 1997