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CRG: No Longer Around But Still Needed

By Rick Pulliam
and Pam Chapman
The Grand Rapids Times

“The Coalition for Representative Government (CRG) was organized in 1984 to assist the Black community in finding, endorsing and getting elected qualified candidates,” said a former President Ellen James.

And there was a need.

At the time, Bill Blickley was a 3rd Ward Grand Rapids City Commissioner who recognized the need for Black representation on the commission.

“When I was elected Commissioner, there were no African Americans on the City Commission and I saw that the African American community was not organized to be able to elect anyone to represent them,” said Blickley.

He added, “I was convinced that there were some really good people in the Black community who would make really excellent City Commissioners. There was no reason to let other people do the organizing and not have people in the African American community do their own organizing; so I started talking to people about that.”

He continued, “There were people who were really disappointed that this light-skinned guy with European background was elected and there were no African Americans elected and I understood that. I got a hold of Ellen James and she made some telephone calls and organized a meeting. Those that attended all agreed that if they just worked hard to get people elected, they good get qualified candidates in office.

“All of our efforts went into achieving CRG’s goals,” said James. The goals were clear.

The group started with the City Commission election, moved on to endorsing candidates for the Grand Rapids Public School Board of Education, then to judges, and then to the Grand Rapids Community College Board of Trustees, James said.

“The first success of the CRG with the Grand Rapids Public School Board was the election of Tom Jackson,” she recalls.

Both the size of the group and its successes continued to grow. “We started with about twenty people and grew to more than one-hundred dues-paying and active members.

The success of the group was based on working together, collectively, not individually. Personal differences were set aside and the work was done for the greater good of the community.

“I remember meeting at the Sheldon Complex in the 1980’s with 150 people who all were on the same page,” said Jim



Armand Robinson



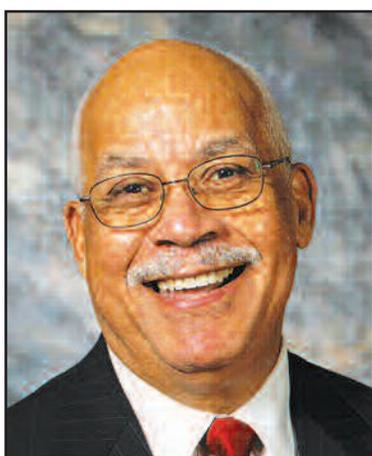
Ellen James



Paul Mayhue



Beverly Drake



Don Williams, Sr.



Bill Blickley



Jim Vaughn



Kenneth Hoskins

“The CRG was a great thing and we need to put it back together,” said James Vaughn. However, we have to be able to get along for the greater good of the community. Today, we have a real problem with people coming together to achieve a common goal,”

Vaughn, a former Kent County Commissioner. “That was a beautiful thing.”

Pastor Kenneth Hoskins was a CRG member and a candidate endorsed by The CRG in his campaign for a seat that he won on the Grand Rapids Public School Board of Education.

He recalls, “At that time we were backing Black candidates with the goal of working within the Third Ward and pushing the people that were qualified of Black ethnicity. Later we started backing candidates of non-Black ethnicity,” said Pastor Kenneth Hoskins.

“The secondary goal was to elect candidates that had the interests of the African American community at heart,” said a former Kent County Commissioner, Paul Mayhue.

CRG was strategic in meeting its goals. The members started on the front end of the

process instead of waiting to choose whom to support from among candidates that had already decided to run.

The organization approached and spoke with people who they thought would be good candidates for the political office coming up for the vote at that time.

CRG conducted meetings, interviewed candidates and then voted as a body to decide whom they would like to see elected and then endorsed and campaigned for that candidate.

“We sought out many candidates such John Hair, Tom Jackson, Lewis Merriwether, Eric Williams and Friley Johnson; then we went out and campaigned for them,” said Armand Robinson.

CRG worked to educate the community about candidates and the about the importance of voting.

“We held forum to inform the community and built a political coalition with different groups in the community to move our agenda forward,” said Mayhue.

CRG members were also foot soldiers.

“We walked communities of voters as well as non-voters, endorsing the CRG’s candidate selection,” said Beverly Drake. “We passed out flyers door-to-door, had radio spots and visited churches.”

“We were speaking with pastors as well as going door-to-door to educate the community about candidates,” said James. “We made sure that the community knew about the candidates and made sure that those communities with low voter turnout and no voter turnout were informed not only about the importance of getting them elected.

Times have changed. Unfortunately, apathy among the Black community is very different today from it was in the 1980’s.

“We tried to recruit younger members to carry on the work of the CRG, but we were unsuccessful,” said James.

Apathy within the Black community has changed drastically since the dis-banding of The CRG.

“We were concentrating on grooming our own qualified people from this community who looked like us. The environment of today is pretty much you vote for whoever you want to and that is what a democratic society is,” said

Pastor Hoskins.

“Today most Blacks seem apathetic. We have fallen out of thoughts, actions. We are just sitting home hoping and praying, but not doing anything to help better our situation,” said Robinson.

He continued, “With CRG, we had a group of people that came out once a month and fought the battle. I don’t hear that group today. The only voice that I hear is Michael Scruggs and his Kent County Black Caucus, but he doesn’t get the following that really could move like the GRG moved and it is time.”

Although CRG no longer exists, it was an organization that served a much-needed purpose. The need that led to its beginning is still present today.

“The CRG was a great thing and we need to put it back together,” said James Vaughn. However, we have to be able to get along for the greater good of the community. Today, we have a real problem with people coming together to achieve a common goal,” Vaughn added.

A former CRG President, Don Williams, Sr. said, “CRG ceased to exist because Blacks in the community saw the opportunity to express themselves or exude their strength and CRG wasn’t as essential to their existence as it should have been and should continue to be.”

Williams added, “We were very responsible as a group to get a number of people elected and that needs to continue.”