

Gala is first charge for consummate public relations professional who leads African American Experience Fund

By Albert C. Jones
America, The Diversity Place

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Lydia Sermons, consummate public relations professional in a city brimming over with publicity and communications facilitators, has stepped into the task of pushing forward the mission of the African American Experience Fund of the National Park Foundation.

AAEF focuses on increasing public awareness and providing grant support to 19 National Parks and the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. “On the Road: People Bridges to People” will post stories on six of the 19 national historic sites.

“One of the most important things that individuals and groups can do is to visit AAEF sites to help bridge the knowledge gap on the whole American story and how the diverse contributions and experiences of African Americans are woven into the fabric of American history and culture,” says Lydia Sermons, AAEF executive director.

Admittedly, when Sermons saw an announcement seeking to fill the executive director’s position, she didn’t know the fund even existed in Washington, D.C. Sermons has established herself with a bevy of public relations and marketing experience among heavy lifters in the nation’s capitol.

Sermons formerly served as communications director for District of Columbia Mayor Anthony A. Williams and press secretary at the White House for President Bill Clinton’s “One America: President’s Initiative on Race.”

When she applied for the AAEF opening, she was a senior vice president at Fenton Communications, where she worked with the BET Foundation and General Mills to produce the Women’s Health Symposium that toured five major U.S. cities with its “Health Matters” theme.

Earlier in her career, Sermons was press secretary for Pennsylvania Congressman Chaka Fattah.

Months later, when responsibility for the overall conduct of the day-to-day activities of the fund became hers on December 1, 2010, Sermons hit the ground, as they say, running. For starters, there was an immediate need to work with trustees on planning for the annual fundraiser, relocate it from New York to the District of Columbia. Her first major task had to be done in half the time of her predecessor.

The 10th Anniversary AAEF Gala, "Celebrating Legacies: Civil War to Civil Rights," will honor civil rights attorney Fred Gray, Dr. Frank Smith, who led the effort to establish the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum in the nation's capitol, and The Walt Disney Company. Smith, founding executive director of the \$3 million museum, was a four-term District of Columbia councilman who represented Ward 1.

Rep. John Lewis, called by his colleagues "the conscience of the U.S. Congress," will be the keynote speaker for the AAEF Gala. Lewis has served Georgia's fifth congressional district since 1987. Lewis is among the giants of the American Civil Rights Movement. As chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a leader of "freedom rides," Lewis led protests that led to desegregation of public accommodations, including buses.

There is a monument that honors Lewis and Hosea Williams, among others, in the roadside park near the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Highway 81 in Selma, Alabama. It was there on March 7, 1965, forever known as "Bloody Sunday," that marchers were viciously beaten by state troopers at start of the Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights.

Soon thereafter Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed it into law.

Throughout his life, Lewis, 71, has acknowledged the first attorney he met during the halcyon days of the Civil Rights Movement was Fred Gray, who, at 24 and just out of law school, successfully argued *Browder v. Gayle*, which integrated the buses in Montgomery in 1956. The Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama was started by Rosa Parks and led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., heading the Montgomery Improvement Association.

Among other notable cases argued by Gray was *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*. Decided in 1960, "it returned Africa-Americans to the city limits of the City of Tuskegee," says Gray's biography and "it opened the door for redistricting and reapportioning the various legislative bodies across the nation and laid the foundation for the concept of 'one man, one voice.'"

The AAEF Gala will be held April 15, 2011 at the Renaissance Hotel, 999 9th Street NW, Washington, D.C. Individual tickets for the black-tie affair are \$250 and may be purchased by Monday, April 11, 2011. Rodney E. Slater, former U.S. Transportation Secretary under President Clinton, is the honorary chair of the AAEF 10th Anniversary Gala. Slater is also a member of the 15-member AAEF Board of Trustees.

"Individuals who contribute to the AAEF through the Gala or through a general contribution of any amount can take pride in knowing they are helping to preserve AAEF national parks and historic sites so that individuals of all races, cultures and ages will continue to have access to and learn more about one of the nation's largest repository of African American history," added Sermons.

Ongoing sponsorship of the programs of AAEF is sought. All contributions to AAEF are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. For more information, please phone Sermons at (202) 354-6489 or email her at LSermons@nationalparks.org.

Since 2001, the AAEF has proceeded with its considerable mission “to connect all Americans to the considerable contributions of African Americans throughout our country’s history by raising public awareness and private funds to support educational, volunteer, and community engagement programs in National Parks and historic sites that celebrate and preserve the story of African American history and culture.”

Sermons, who was part of Fenton’s public health practice and its emerging practices in African American issues and local government initiatives, is now charged with, as executive director, “oversight of management, control of all assets and conduct of the affairs of AAEF.”

She serves at the pleasure of the AAEF Board of Trustees and reports to Neil Mulholland, president of the National Park Foundation through his chief of staff.

Carole F. Hall, a retired book editor and publisher, whose clients include actress Ruby Dee and South African legend Miriam Makeba, and whose books have won honors from the American Library Association and American Book Awards, is chair of the AAEF Board.

Chartered by Congress in 1967, the National Park Foundation (NPF) is the 501(c)(3) nonprofit national charitable and promotional partner of America’s 392 national parks.

NPF is governed by a board of 22 national, civic and business leaders who are appointed by the Secretary of the Interior. Secretary Ken Salazar serves as chairman of the NPF Board and director of the National Park Service is the board’s secretary.

The mission of the National Park Foundation is to strengthen the connection between the American people and their national parks by raising private funds, making strategic grants, creating innovative partnerships and increasing public awareness.

AAEF has provided more than \$1.3 million to support education, volunteer and community engagement programs at 19 National Parks and the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

The sites include African Burial Ground National Monument, New York; Booker T. Washington National Monument, Virginia; Boston African American National Historic Site, Massachusetts; Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, Kansas; Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Louisiana; Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site and Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, D.C.

Other sites are George Washington Carver National Monument, Missouri; Little Rock Central High School Historic Site, Arkansas; Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, Virginia; Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, Georgia; Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, Washington, D.C.; Natchez National Historic Park, Mississippi; New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, Louisiana; Nicodemus National Historic Site, Kansas; Paul Laurence Dunbar House, Dayton; and Aviation Heritage National Park, Ohio;

Alabama sites include Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site and Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site.

The National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom forms an ever expanding collection of over 200 sites throughout the U.S., Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean associated with the Underground Railroad.



Attorney Fred Gray, left, who will be honored during the AAEF Gala, appears in archived photo with Rep. John Lewis and the late Rep. Stephanie Tubbs-Jones.



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