

Last week on May 19, 2011, we lost the Honorable Don Barden who was a trailblazer for economic empowerment in our communities. Don was born in Inkster, Michigan, a Detroit suburb, which was the home of the first Black owned radio station, WCHB, and was also the abode of the great Stevie Wonder. He was the ninth of 14 children and shared a bed with three of his brothers. It was there that he resolved he would become an entrepreneur. He rejected the common option of working in an auto plant and went off to college at Central State University in Ohio. He soon ran out of money and took \$500 in savings and opened a record store in Lorain, Ohio (a Cleveland suburb).

Donnie Records became a success and promoted appearances by the Jackson Five and James Brown. He stayed 20 years in Lorain, Ohio and became the first Black member of its City Council and also founded a newspaper known as The Lorain County Times. Also, he worked as a news anchor and hosted a weekly television talk show. He was indeed an innovator.

Having ventured in real estate in Ohio, Don turned his focus back to his home in the Detroit area during the 1980's. His timing was perfect. The nation was experiencing strong Black mayors who were determined to make Black business moguls. Harold Washington in Chicago; Marion Barry in DC; Carl Stokes in Cleveland; Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, Maynard Jackson of Atlanta, etc. were determined to make a difference and leave a legacy. Mayor Coleman Young of Detroit was no different. So when the cable television contract presented itself to the Detroit market, Mayor Young pursued the most capable Black business person to gift the opportunity. Don Barden, like Robert Johnson in DC (aided by Mayor Marion Barry) was awarded the contract to install a system throughout the city.

This gave him leverage for greater things. Robert Johnson leveraged his DC cable franchise into the great BET Corporation. Likewise, Don Barden sold his cable company and took the revenue into a casino endeavor. That is where I met him. Indiana was allowing six casinos into the state and the Honorable Bill Crawford, Indiana State Representative, insisted on Black ownership on at least one of the casinos. People thought this was far-fetched but Bill insisted. Out of the "blue" came Don Barden who stated he would build a casino franchise if the State of Indiana would license him. He had just sold his cable franchise to Comcast and was flush with cash. So when the question came up as to how he would finance it he stated "I will do it with my own cash". Let me tell you those Indiana Hoosiers were indeed shocked.

Thus the first Black owned casino was built in Indiana, the Majestic Star Casino. He would later build casinos in Tunica, Mississippi, Las Vegas, Colorado and Pittsburgh. Of late, the casino

portion of his portfolio was floundering (from the recession) and is currently in bankruptcy proceedings.

A big heartbreak for Don was when Detroit decided to bring seven casinos to the city. It seemed like a natural for him. The only Black owner of casinos in the nation and casinos were coming to his home. However, the city of Detroit no longer had a mayor of Coleman Young's ilk and the city council was now thinking that "white man's ice was colder". They made moves to insure that their own Don Barden would not receive a casino license. It was and still remains a terrible disgrace. It is the current mindset that leaves this city in extreme turmoil.

When I wrote an editorial decrying this injustice the local Detroit democratic operatives did what they usually do. They performed a forensic audit on Don Barden's company and personal expenses hoping to find an instance that he gave me or the NBCC money to protest this injustice. They, of course, found nothing and were bewildered with the fact that I protested on principle alone.

Don Barden was indeed a great brother. He never forgot where he came from. He organized a series of regional economic peace conferences to address Detroit's immense crime problem. He was continually involved in community interaction and sought to solve the problems to a city so terribly corrupted by crime and immoral elected officials. He showed us how you can rise from the abyss and still stand strong and be a leader and business owner.

I will miss and cherish the nights sitting across a table from him and having a casual conversation while we sipped our favored drink. He was a mogul and yet he was as common as the guy living next door. Detroit and America are better because Don Barden came through and made a difference. Enjoy Heaven Don.

Mr. Alford is the co-founder, President/CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce®. Website: [www.nationalbcc.org](http://www.nationalbcc.org) . Email: [halford@nationalbcc.org](mailto:halford@nationalbcc.org) .