

AFRICAN AMERICAN JEWISH COALITION

A Brief History by Thaddeus Spratlen

Meetings to form AAJJCJ began in Seattle in 1992. The organization began officially in July 1993 when leaders from the Jewish Peace Fellowship and Black Dollar Task Force agreed to join forces to support economic justice in establishing a loan fund in the tradition of the Hebrew Free Loan Fund. This agreement led to the formation and support of Campaign 5000, a loan fund that would support small African American businesses and contribute in other ways to business and economic development primarily in the Central and Rainier Valley Areas of Seattle.

AAJJCJ was formed with a unique structure and a very ambitious social justice and relationship-building agenda. A co-chair was elected from each group to provide joint leadership. Stefan Merkan of the Jewish Peace Fellowship and Rev. Robert Jeffrey, Sr. of New Hope Baptist Church and head of the Black Dollar Task Force were the first Co-Chairs. Since then, Charles Davis, Jerry Saltzman and Don Armstrong have served in the role from the Jewish community. The African American community has been represented in the role by Rev. Zachary Bruce, Thaddeus Spratlen, Deborah Jones, and Kelle Brown. In 2005 the structure was changed to a single leader format, alternating between our two communities.

The AAJJCJ social justice and relationship-building agendas have been very ambitious from the start. Very early on there were committees or individual leaders mobilizing responses to hate crimes. Educational and cultural programs were offered. A pairing project was started and sustained for many years that featured pairing either individual Jewish and African American members or couples and families as a means of increasing dialogue, mutual understanding and building stronger social relationships.

Over the years, pursuing justice and increasing mutual cooperation and understanding between our two groups have taken many different forms. The Coalition has a record of generosity, social action, offering educational and cultural programs, and trying to improve relations between African Americans and Jews in the Pacific Northwest region. Freedom seders were organized for nearly a decade, with as many as 300-400 attendees in some years. The Coalition has also held an annual holiday program for Chanukah, Christmas and Kwanzaa. Our justice advocacy work included presentations to the Seattle School Board to grant contracts for minority businesses, an effort eventually halted by Initiative 200. There were meet, greet and eat events as well.

On the service side of contributions, we worked together at food bank warehouses, painted a house for an elderly low-income person and helped in other ways as organized by June Chaus, founding treasurer and editor of the Coalition Connection. In early 2002, attention focused on reparations education and advocacy, and on a Black scholar's project to grant textbook scholarship to financial-aid eligible Black students at Seattle University. Subsequently the scholarship program was expanded to include individual students from ethnically diverse backgrounds, with priority given to African American and Jewish applicants who met eligibility criteria.

Our challenges have always been to build and sustain committed relationships among members of our two communities. AAJJCJ continues to increase mutual understanding and cooperation along with building better relationships among African Americans and Jews in the region. We invite those who agree with our mission to support our programs and activities in the cause of diversity, opportunity, and better relationships between African Americans and Jews. Interested individuals are welcome from both communities.