

## Miami boycott initiative shifts focus

Contributed by CAROLYN GUNNIS

The last active program from the 1990 Boycott Miami initiative is trying to reinvent itself and its mission.

The Visitor Industry Human Resource Development Council – better known as the Visitors Industry Council or VIC — for 19 years has put on the Hospitality Open Golf Tournament (HOT) Challenge, an event that has raised an average of \$90,000 per year to fund scholarships for black students.

At its May 7 golf tournament at the Doral Golf Resort & Spa, the VIC will announce a name change and a redefined mission.

The Black Hospitality Initiative of Greater Miami, the new name, reflects those who are served by the organization and its widened focus.

In addition to providing scholarships, the group will work on advocating the expansion of entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities for blacks in the hospitality industry; and offer assistance with talent development and career coaching. The HOT Challenge will continue.

VIC Chair and W South Beach General Manager George Cozonis was planning to announce the name and mission changes during a luncheon after the tournament.

“We want when we talk our name identifies our area of focus; we focus on blacks and the hospitality industry,” Cozonis said, of adding “black” to the name.

The VIC was created after one of Miami’s darkest moments. Former City of Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez refused to welcome just-freed anti-Apartheid activist Nelson Mandela when he came to Miami. A proclamation from the city to Mandela was rescinded. Suarez, Miami’s first Cuban-American mayor, took issue with Mandela’s supportive statements about Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Jews and Arabs were upset, too. Apologies were demanded; none were forthcoming for months.

Blacks, led by Miami lawyer H.T. Smith, launched a successful economic boycott in June 1990. It lasted 33 months.

Smith said the snubbing of Mandela was the last straw, and it pushed him over the edge. He had been stewing over the deplorable, economic dichotomy between blacks and other races in what was then Metro-Dade. He was disturbed by the diminished treatment of Haitian immigrants.

He had witnessed three riots in the 1980s — what he calls the emotional outworking of the inequality — and its consequences: loss of life and property.

Smith pondered what could be done to show disfavor with the disparity in the distribution of the economic development pie.

He approached the 1,000-member National Bar Association, and asked it to cancel its 1993 convention scheduled for Miami. It did. Soon, others joined.

By the time the boycott ended in 1993, Miami had lost more than 25 meetings and about \$17-\$25 million in visitor revenue, resulting in a 20-point initiative that was developed by Smith and the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau. It included scholarship and mentoring in the hospitality industry for blacks.

One of those initiatives was that blacks should own a convention-quality hotel on Miami Beach. The Royal Palm Resort, developed by real estate developer R. Donahue Peebles, opened as a Crown Plaza in 2002. Peebles sold the hotel in 2005, but kept a 12-percent stake, which he relinquished in 2009.

“The image that Miami was insensitive to its black citizens was a problem for me,” said Merritt Stierheim, then-president and CEO of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Out of that boycott was born the VIC, created and supported by the bureau.

“I represented 1,000 hotels, taxi, concessionaires; basically, the industry I represented was most affected” by the boycott, Stierheim said. “Moral and conscience issues aside, as business people, no one liked the boycott.”

One issue that bubbled up at the time was that the industry did not employ enough black people.

“We drilled down, and it was true that blacks were underrepresented in management and paraprofessionals in major hotels,” Stierheim said.

“I decided the way to attack that is by education through the FIU hospitality management program,” he said “I raised \$100,000 from the industry, went to Knight Foundation for a 3-year grant, and got it. But I wanted the scholarship fund to be a sustaining program, so we decided to do the HOT Challenge.”

The VIC puts on the HOT Challenge golf tournament, which has raised \$1.4 million over 19 years.

The VIC has issued scholarships to the tune of \$1.2 million that paid tuition and books to 200 black students who attend Miami Dade College, Florida International University or Johnson & Wales University to study hospitality, tourism or culinary education.

Those who have benefited from the VIC say the free tuition in their junior and senior years was priceless.

Crystal Harvey received a VIC scholarship to attend Florida International University's School of Hospitality Management. After graduation, she went to work in the hospitality industry at Carnival Cruise Lines. After eight years with the company, Harvey serves as training and development specialist.

Harvey was impressed with how much the VIC promoted relationship building and mentoring. Her mentor was Larry Rice, dean of Academic Affairs at Johnson & Wales.

"They didn't just leave you hanging; they didn't just give you the money; they were able to give me a solid foundation," Harvey said. "They gave us suggestions on courses to take; kept us in the know about industry happenings; they groomed us a lot."

Almost 20 years after the boycott began, Smith said it is nice to walk into a nice hotel and have a black manager greet me.

"That is what we wanted," Smith said. "We wanted to unlock a vault of opportunity in the tourism industry and ensure that those vaults remain open for years to come."

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Photo: H.T. Smith