

CHOKWE LUMUMBA — A REMEMBRANCE

September 1965: Two young men, both eighteen years old, one from Detroit, the other from Chicagoland, meet for the first time on the campus of Kalamazoo College, geographic halfway point between the two distinctly different lives they've led until that moment. As incoming freshmen at K-College, they soon find themselves sent out, along with a handful of other classmates, to their campus work assignment meant to defray the cost of tuition: in their case, to the school's maintenance department, and more immediately, to raking leaves—on Kazoo's wooded campus never a small job during the fall season. Riding in the back of department head Excel Bailey's open flat-bed truck, a pensive observer of the two lads might wonder about the eventual destiny of the gangly Motown athlete sprawled out across the piled leaves, his sullen, brooding mien harboring guarded thoughts; or that of the giddy, precocious Windy City suburbanite opposite him, leaning on the wooden tailgate and babbling in French about Bach and baguettes. One thing is certain, though: no such observer could have imagined that both young men would eventually spend the major part of their lives after K in the capital city of the deepest of Deep South states—Jackson, Mississippi—or that one of them would rise to become a beloved Mayor of that city.

I was that freshman from the south suburbs of Chicago, and perhaps I flatter myself by also asserting that I was in some respects that pensive observer, for I do remember wondering, as I rode in the back of that truck with Ed Taliaferro and several other freshmen peers, what fate would have in store for two beings as seemingly disparate as Ed and myself, and what the future would hold for a young man born into what I assumed was his disadvantaged station in life compared to the more privileged status I could quietly, if undeservedly, claim. As the months passed, we went our own ways on campus, gravitating to our own separate circles of friends, he with his basketball pals, I with my Baroque music crowd; we rarely crossed paths. In some ways I may have found him intimidating in his outspokenness and his mood difficult to “read” when expressed by a cold stare or a laconic barb directed against the status quo and its stakeholders in authority. To some of us he may have even seemed “scary.”

Fate did have it that three years later I would witness the very moment that Ed Taliaferro later claimed changed the direction of his life, the event that became “the single most important thing in my political development,” and “my entrée into the human rights movement,” as he later wrote. This happened around suppertime on Thursday, April 4, 1968, in the basement lounge of Severn Hall. The Spring Quarter was just beginning; I had recently returned from my six-month Foreign Study stint in Caen, France, and was watching TV in the dorm's common lounge when the breaking news of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination startled the few of us who were passing the time there before heading to supper at Welles Hall. Minutes later Ed walked in, laughing and joshing with several other basketball players with whom he had been shooting hoops at Tredway Gym. They were expecting to get cleaned up before heading to Welles, and Ed asked us what was

going on in the news. We told him what we were learning from the TV's special report, and immediately the room got quiet and the mood grew solemn and tense—I could sense real anger and helplessness well up in Ed's eyes as he took in the horrible reality of the things we were hearing had occurred in Memphis that day. He may have changed his name officially two years later, but I feel it was at that moment that the former Edwin Taliaferro became the future Chokwe Lumumba, the 'gifted warrior' ready to lead many fellow K students like myself in peaceful but potent demonstrations in downtown Kalamazoo's Bronson Park during those turbulent days following the assassination of Dr. King.

We all witnessed Ed's dedication to a cause grow more focused and fervent during our senior year with the formation of the Black Student Organization, with demonstrations in front of Mandelle Hall and campus-wide assemblies in Dalton Theater. His terse but timely directive to us all: "Check yourselves out," is memorialized in our senior yearbook (page 164) and still jars us into self-examination and introspection a half century after he uttered it. The steely determination set in his eyes grabs our attention in a graduation day photo (p. 166); his senior picture (p. 23) showing him holding a copy of Stokely Carmichael's book, *Black Power*, is so iconic of the 1960's that it was chosen by Kalamazoo College to represent that entire decade of turmoil and triumph at Homecoming 2009, our 40th Reunion year, in a display case in the Upjohn Library lobby. His work begun not only here at K, but on other Michigan campuses, helped force a shift of institutional resources from "buildings" to Black Studies courses and early childhood educational opportunities in predominantly African-American neighborhoods in Kalamazoo and other Michigan towns.

The "pensive observer" that I may have been, riding in the back of that dump truck in Fall 1965, certainly underestimated the strength of the family background that had enriched the formative grade-school and high-school years of the young man across from me, for Edwin Finley Taliaferro was raised by proud, socially activist parents of eight children who, like Edwin, the second-born, had accompanied their mother in her neighborhood fundraising efforts in support of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a youth group that pushed for and helped achieve the transformation of many of the structural barriers woven into the very fabric of American culture. Edwin learned the importance of freedom, equality, and family cohesion from parents who were active in Detroit's Civil Rights and Black Catholic Family Movements.

I still vividly recall, in the late summer of 1955, reading in the pages of the *Chicago Daily News* about the funeral of Emmett Till, the Chicago youth whose mother courageously allowed his mutilated body to be viewed in an open casket after it had been brought back to Chicago from rural Mississippi, where her son had been brutally murdered by Klansmen because he had reportedly whistled at a white woman. As an eight-year-old I could only imagine the bloated, disfigured appearance of Emmett's tortured face as described in the newspaper account. I did not know that my young contemporaries in Detroit, children like Edwin and his playmates, would see firsthand the terrifying, graphic photograph of Till's butchered face that appeared in *Jet Magazine*, which had had the courage to print it. Indeed he *had* seen it, stating later in his writings that the gruesome image "first pricked my political conscience."

After graduation from K, Ed went on to study at Wayne State University Law School in Detroit, but soon became involved in the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), an organization that believed Black people had a right to land and reparations in the Blackbelt South. Now known as Chokwe Lumumba, he briefly moved to Jackson, Mississippi in 1971 to assist in the mission of the RNA. He was not physically present in Jackson on the day when an armed confrontation between RNA members and the local police took place at the organization's headquarters. Even so, his name became associated with that violent event in the minds of some conservative citizens and the entrenched power structure then in place. After this brief incursion into the "nitty-gritty" of field-work lawyering in a town as tough as Jackson, Chokwe returned to Wayne State, graduating cum laude in 1975, and immediately set out on his journey to become the "People's Lawyer."

From the late 1970's when he set up his own law firm, and through the decade of the eighties on into the nineties, Chokwe's professional career as a lawyer went national. He worked independently or with legal teams from New York to California, defending nationally known figures ranging from the Brinks robbers to Tupac Shakur. Whether as a lead defense counsel or an attorney, his legal career was—from the start—radical and often controversial, a challenging, "by-any-means-necessary" call to action to "Free the land!" that found sympathetic ears among the dispossessed communities he sought to help, but that angered the power-wielding elite. Friends and fellow law partners alike said of him: "He defended anyone he thought needed help, anyone he thought he could help, and more importantly, anyone who no one else would help."

But 'Chokwe Lumumba the Strong Family Man' would remain a "work in progress" through the decade of the 1970's. The Edwin Taliaferro we knew when we left K College was, like a good number of us, a product of the revolutionary and sexually libertine '60's; his first marriage, blessed with the birth of a son, Kambon, ended in divorce in the early '70's. As Lumumba later explained to *Essence Magazine*, "My politics were dictated by the climate and agenda of the '60's when the overriding objective was the push for Black Power. Most black men received a heavy dose of the macho ethic in the process." Lumumba said the political climate of the time provided a rationale for such behavior. The Movement came first—everything else, including family responsibilities, was secondary. But by the 1980's this would change as he readopted the strong values modeled not only by his mother in his youth, but by his hero, Malcolm X.

Chokwe met the love of his life in 1976 while on a plane traveling for work: Patricia Charlene Burke, a flight attendant, caught his eye; the two eventually married in 1981, but only after two separations and the birth of a daughter had persuaded him that having a stable marriage was not incongruous with freedom fighting. His charming wife later adopted the name, Nubia Alake, derived from the Nubian people of Egypt, which traditionally denotes a beautiful and desirable woman, and Alake, "one to be made much of." Chokwe could now in good faith rightfully assert: "Family is a unit of struggle (the foundation of Our nation.)"

The new couple was blessed with two children: daughter Rukia, and son Chokwe Antar. The family moved to Jackson, Mississippi in 1988 where father Chokwe established his law practice,

becoming a noted legal and community advocate, focusing on clients who had experienced violations of their fundamental human rights. He was instrumental in creating the Malcolm X Center for Self Determination and served as founder and chairperson of the New Afrikan Peoples Organization. He participated in community youth programs, anti-crime patrols, political education forums, legal service clinics, and—ever true to basketball skills in evidence at K decades earlier when playing for the Hornets--coached a basketball team for the youth of the city, the Jackson Panthers, which under his aegis went on to garner national attention with several championships.

Just as had been true during our years at Kalamazoo, I rarely crossed paths with Chokwe in a city of 200,000 inhabitants, but when we did so, as in courthouse hallways, we would exchange greetings or reminisce about mutually shared experiences at K. But when he did commit to aspiring to elected public office, I supported him at each step, attending rallies, election-night watch-parties, his mayoral inauguration ceremony and ultimately, his ‘Homegoing’ memorial service, representing, when asked to do so, the well-wishes of his undergraduate alma mater.

Given his vision of the world, it seemed surprising that Chokwe would run for office. But even from his vantage point as a successful attorney and beloved human rights advocate, he wanted the world to know that a compassionate and effective government was possible. In 2009 he was elected Councilman from Ward 2 to Jackson’s city council (7 wards plus a mayor). During his term on the council, he realized that in order to make a substantive difference, he needed to run for Mayor. I remember meeting with him at his favorite IHOP for breakfast in early 2013 as he laid out his plans for the upcoming mayoral campaign. It was a long-shot, but he was steadfast and persevered, winning a primary run-off and getting 87 percent of the popular vote in a city of about 70 percent African-American population. He assumed office on July 1, 2013, the third African-American to hold the title of Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. His administration’s working motto: “One City, One Aim, One Destiny!” Sadly, he was to pass away less than eight months later, on February 25, 2014. I had planned to meet with him in his office the following week. It was not to be.

Mayor Chokwe Lumumba’s signature achievement during his all-too-brief administration was to persuade the citizenry to vote on and pass an additional one-cent sales tax on certain goods, which would help offset the cost of needed infrastructure repairs. But it was his passionate authenticity in interactions with others that won over even his most skeptical detractors. A few months into his term as Mayor, he exclaimed, “I told you when I ran for office that I was running on an agenda of compassion, justice and human rights. That’s my story and I’m sticking with it. Free the land!” “Love, plus the power of God, plus the power of the people equals progress!”

The dean of Jackson editorialists [Charlie Mitchell, *The Clarion-Ledger* 03/13/2014, p. 2-C] spoke for a number of residents when he wrote: “In the aftermath of Jackson Mayor Chokwe Lumumba’s death, a consensus seems to have emerged, at least among his detractors, that he had mellowed with age. After all, isn’t that what happens? Isn’t the standard narrative that youthful idealism gives way to mature realism?”

“But a closer look reveals that may not have been the case for Lumumba, whose death at age 66 (...) came as a shock to everyone except his family and closest friends. He may not have fit that narrative. It could be that he was always a pragmatic guy, just with a shorter than normal fuse when it came to tolerance for injustice as he described it. Firebrand? You bet. Scary guy as far as the FBI and mainstream Mississippi were concerned? Definitely. (...) There was fuel for speculation that a Lumumba administration would fail. (...) That, however, did not happen. Although he only served eight months, Lumumba charted a course of open government, welcoming anyone and everyone to the table to offer ideas and strategies to reduce crime, improve roads and utilities, [and] make the city a more welcoming place. He gently distanced himself from hangers-on, goofballs and loudmouths. He engendered optimism by action. Did the radical go soft in his dotage? It’s possible. But examining the entire narrative of his life, a different view seems more likely. There’s room to debate his definition of justice and just causes, but there can be no doubt he was more dedicated to building up than tearing down.”

Happily for the City of Jackson and State of Mississippi, after an intervening mayoral term, Chokwe’s son, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba, now serves the capital city in his father’s stead, building on his father’s legacy of lessons learned and battles first won on the campus of a unique liberal arts college in his home state of Michigan.

Max C. Garriott (Class of 1969)

This document was prepared for oral delivery before attendees of the “Class Seminar” designed for alumni members of the Kalamazoo College Class of 1969, held at 10:30 a.m. in Room 103 of Dewing Hall on Saturday, October 19, 2019, as an official 50th Reunion event at the College.