

Freedom From Fear Awards: Immigrant rights a new frontier for Black activist

Written by Jonah Most, New America Media
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Part one in a six-part series profiling the winners of the Freedom From Fear Awards.

It was reading Malcolm X that convinced Chokwe Lumumba to go to law school. Malcolm X had wanted to be a lawyer, but his teachers discouraged him. As an undergraduate student at Kalamazoo College in Michigan in the late 1960s, Lumumba decided to be the lawyer that Malcolm X might have been.

In the nearly four decades since then, Lumumba has championed for civil rights in Michigan and Mississippi, working as a lawyer representing accused murderers in front of unsympathetic juries; as the vice-president of the Republic of New Afrika, a Detroit-based Black-nationalist group in the late '60s; and currently as a City Council Member in Jackson, Miss.

In June, however, Lumumba was recognized for serving a different community. He is one of this year's recipients of the Freedom from Fear Award, produced by the nonprofit group, Public Interest Projects. The honor recognized accomplishments made on behalf of immigrants and refugees.

Stopping Unwarranted Immigration Inquiries

Among other accomplishments, Lumumba's citation notes that last summer he introduced a Jackson City Council measure preventing the city's police from making "unwarranted inquiries into a person's immigration status."

Lumumba, who saw the bill as an extension of his career fighting for Black civil rights, worked with the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA) and became aware of challenges facing the growing number of immigrants in southern states.

In a phone interview, Lumumba said Latinos have become targets of the same white supremacy levied at African Americans for generations. Although Blacks have made great strides in Jackson -- they are now the majority group in Jackson and have claimed five of seven seats on

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the Jackson City Council -- immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented, are still struggling for basic civil liberties.

The Hispanic population in Mississippi has nearly doubled in the last decade, from 1.4 percent in 2000 to 2.7 percent, according to the 2010 Census. That mirrors a trend across the South.

MIRA Executive Director Bill Chandler said the number of Latinos in Mississippi may actually be much higher. He cited a survey of church and union memberships that found more than twice as many Hispanics in Mississippi than the 2000 Census figures show.

Chandler said that, together, Blacks and Latinos constitute a significant political bloc, and this has helped to prevent discriminatory legislation from advancing through the state legislature. An Arizona-style immigration law introduced in the state senate failed to pass, in large part because of opposition from Black representatives, Chandler said.

"The majority of whites in Mississippi are scared to death of people of color becoming a majority, not only in Mississippi but nationally," Chandler said.

The ordinance Lumumba introduced aims to combat the troubling phenomenon of immigrants without papers allowing them to be in the United States legally, who decline to report crimes to the police for fear that doing so will lead to checks on their residency status.

"I saw how tragic that was, people getting their cars stolen and, in one case, a woman getting raped," he said. "The combination of these factors led me to know we needed to get something done."

Eloquent -- With a Knack for Trouble

In the mold of Malcolm X, Lumumba is an eloquent speaker with a knack for raising trouble. He grew up in a household where Martin Luther King was considered to be 'the Black Moses.' He credits his parents for endowing him with an unshakable social conscious. Not afraid to speak his mind, Lumumba was once held in contempt of court for telling a judge "he was handling a case like a racist."

Lumumba originally went to college to play sports. But, after sustaining injuries, he became increasingly interested in the civil rights protests occurring in the 1960s. After experiencing riots in Detroit, he said, he decided to become "closer to the movement instead of just an observer."

In 1969, Lumumba became one of an unprecedented 24 Black students enrolled in Wayne State University's law school. However, by the end of the year, 18 of them -- not including Lumumba -- had flunked out. Lumumba remembers his professors making statements such as "these Blacks cannot be good lawyers," and that they can tell their work "is Black writing."

Lumumba and his peers seized the law-school building and stayed until the administration agreed to reenroll the students. All but two ended up graduating and several have become prominent lawyers and judges.

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After this victory, Lumumba went to the South to work with lawyers organizing for human rights. "I gained a lot of humility," he said. "Young students from the North always think they're really smart. But really, the southern culture, if you take the racism out, is a very gracious culture."

Lumumba said he became addicted Southern life, and he later returned with his wife and three children.

Using Authority for Progress

After decades spent fighting unjust powers, Lumumba now finds him in the curious position of being an authority. He noted, "I think that I'm beginning to learn that you can use authority for very progressive purposes, so I've become less tolerant of people, who don't use their power to move the world ahead."

Lumumba said he plans to continue to advocate for immigrant rights, and he envisions Blacks and Hispanics forming a natural coalition in cities like Jackson.

Through his long career, Lumumba has lived to see tangible results. While there is still much racism in Mississippi, he said, Blacks fighting for voter-protection laws and for representation have "won them the respect of the white community."

Lumumba sees the struggle of African Americans as parallel to conflicts facing undocumented immigrants. "As long as Blacks were pushed underneath people's feet, I think it was very easy to have very unrealistic views of who Black people were in terms of notions of [their] inferiority," he said.

He credits the ordinance he introduced in Jackson as helping prevent Arizona-style immigration laws in the Mississippi legislature by galvanizing the Black community around the issue of immigrant rights.

"Because of our history we want to make [Jackson] a shining light for people," he said.

Lumumba added that Jackson makes an ideal model because "we've been tested more than anyone else."

But while Lumumba calls human rights his forte, he must balance such efforts with the practical reality of city governance.

Lumumba also serves as the City Council's budget chair and is on the water and sewer committee.

"It makes me really busy," he said.