

Empowering the Black Community Through Voting

by Patricia Smith-Deering

This final in a series of interviews with the much-beleaguered Rodney Sumler focuses on the integral role he has played in the political empowerment of individuals in the black community. Recognizing that the right to vote has been a hard-fought battle for blacks, Sumler has been actively involved with efforts to bring that empowerment about.

For 22 years Sumler has been a registrar in Winston-Salem starting in the Carver precinct, then the Mineral Springs precinct, and currently serving as a registrar in the Lowrance precinct in the Northeast Ward. He estimates that during that time he has registered more than 5,000 blacks, including 1,000 black Republicans. "I was a Democratic registrar for 10 years," he says, "and I've been a

Republican registrar for 12 years."

Sumler's involvement in politics began in high school when he was elected president of the Atkins High School student council and continued later with the Carver Civic Club. He says, "I was elected president of the once powerful Carver Civic Club that was instrumental in starting the Carver precinct." That precinct, he contends, has led the city's black community and the city's black precincts for the last 25 years in the percentage of blacks that turn out to vote. Working together, the Carver precinct--where he was registrar at the time--and the Carver Civic Club encouraged more voting, arranged to get candidates before the people, and, as Sumler puts it, "decided on who they were going to vote for collectively."

Sumler believes that a number of the problems he has experienced,

both past and present, stem from his Republican affiliation, being a catalyst for change, and his other political involvement. He discovered in 1975 during an NAACP voter registration drive that some of those he had registered as Republicans two years earlier had been rejected without his being notified. "A lot of them were disqualified because the Democrats in charge of the Board of Elections at that time didn't want black Republicans (and) would find fault with my...process for registration and purged some of these people." He adds, "I don't know why they were purged. I didn't know that they had been purged...No one notified me that there was anything wrong."

He links the demise of the Carver Civic Club to that same party affiliation. Referring to his termination in 1975 from

the City of Winston-Salem Recreation Department, Sumler says, "I was fired after I became a Republican and angered some blacks. I was terminated...allegedly for violating purchasing procedures for getting a discount for three color televisions that I bought." He insists, however, that he had done no more and no less than white city employees. He explains, "I used my money to purchase door prizes to promote a city-wide youth program." But, as a result, he says, "The Carver Civic Club was victimized by my being fired by the City of Winston-Salem. It's unfortunate that black people don't understand that the more you become empowered to help other people, the weaker you are in terms of helping yourself because when you need help, who's there to help the helper?" He continues, "We as a

people don't work together." Summing up the two incidents, he concludes, "It shows that there's a dual system and shows that I was fired for racist reasons by white people and political reasons by black people because the ones who helped start the process of getting me fired."

Sumler has found that being outspokenly critical in the political arena and daring to be different can take its toll when the black community is not supportive and the white power structure seeks to destroy an individual who has sought simply to "give something back to my community," as he states his case. "I take issue with the fact that white people still want to pick who the black leaders are for us. The white media, the white 'powers that be' seem to always want to pick the black folk that they want to deal with."

In fact he believes that

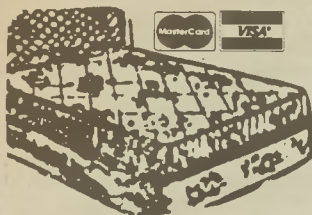
the current FBI/IRS investigation into his activities stems from white, and some black, perceptions of his role in the black community. He says, "Blacks need to remember what FBI means. It has a history of investigating presidents (unfairly), their own boss, (and) each other, every man (Dr. King, for example) and any black man in America that is trying to help black people."

"As far as this investigation of me is concerned, I think it was a deliberate effort to discredit black leadership and me and to further separate black leadership and anger people at me," Sumler says.

Referring to a comment that appeared in a Winston-Salem Journal article when the investigation was uncovered, Sumler contends, "The Journal came out and made a comment that I had been a force in the black

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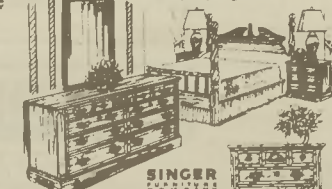


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