

INTERVIEW

Free: Now He Can Concentrate On Basketball

By SAM DAVIS
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MEAC Commissioner Ken Free breathed a sigh of relief recently after unveiling plans to move the conference's post-season basketball tournament to Philadelphia.

The annual tourney, which serves as the major fundraising event for the league, had not fared well in recent years.

Free said things hit rock-bottom when the combined attendance for the first two nights of the 1984 tourney was only 4,200 and a mere 4,085 were on hand for the championship game.

But in an agreement recently completed between the MEAC and the City of Philadelphia, the conference stands to net close to \$100,000 in addition to expenses for its six member schools.

Now that the league has reached a lucrative pact to host its annual basketball tournament at the Palestra on the campus of the University of Philadelphia, Free said his office can concentrate on other priorities.

"My office can now devote time to developing a basketball tournament," Free said in an interview at MEAC headquarters in Greensboro, N.C. "We won't have to worry about scheduling entertainment to increase attendance or any of the other things which are not related to producing a quality basketball tournament."

Free said the conference's pact with Philadelphia came as the result of careful foresight and with the help of several MEAC alumni who felt the conference would benefit from a change in location for the ailing tourney.

"We threw around several ideas and talked with various civic leaders in sites we thought would increase attendance," Free said.

"We set our sights high so that we would finish the tournament in the black and have some funds remaining for league functions. We sort of mentioned the goal of having a guarantee of \$100,000 and expenses for the staffs and teams from all league schools."

Bill Blakely, a North Carolina A&T alumnus, played a vital role in the MEAC's agreement with Philadelphia.



MEAC Commissioner Free: Banking on Philadelphia's good will and MEAC alumni to turn the MEAC Tournament around (photo by Joe Daniels).

Blakely, who lives in Washington, D.C., first approached officials from his city about the idea, but received no favorable responses.

Blakely then talked to high-ranking officials from Philadelphia, who were interested from the start.

"We approached them from the highest level of city officials," said Free. "At the time we first approached them, Wilson Goode was running for office. Once Mayor Goode won the election, he was sold on the idea that the tournament would be an asset to the community. What it means to him and the city of Philadelphia is that it will bring a quality, historically black activity to their city."

Another factor that helped influence the move to Philadelphia was the fact that the Palestra's director, Charles Harris, is an alumnus of Hampton Institute.

"Being an alumnus of a black in-

stitution, he could relate to the tournament and see how the tournament could gain support in a city where quality basketball is appreciated," Free said.

Thus, when the Philadelphia Advisory Committee (a leg of the Philadelphia Mayor's Office) approached the Palestra and Harris, the agreement was cemented.

In fact, Free said after initiating talks with city officials, Philadelphia's private sector said it would help insure the tournament's success.

"The hotels and other businesses have really opened up to us," said Free. "The elements in Philadelphia have taken the primary lead in promoting the tournament."

"Also," he said, "they have assured us that we'll get good coverage from the press. The people of Philadelphia feel that the MEAC should build in a city of neutrality and, with

Philadelphia being a basketball town, they feel it would be an excellent association."

The plan for filling the 9,200-seat Palestra each of the three nights the tournament is held is to draw about 4,000 people from Philadelphia that enjoy watching quality basketball. Then Free said he hopes that some 4,000 alumni of MEAC member schools will travel to Philadelphia for the tournament.

Hopefully, he said, the remaining seats will be taken by students of participating schools.

"Most of our schools have very strong and active alumni organizations in Philadelphia," said Free. "Actually, the majority of our alumni live within three hours of Philadelphia. I think we'll also have good participation from the students because four of our member schools (Delaware State, Howard, Morgan State and Maryland-Eastern Shore) are not more than a three-hour drive from Philadelphia."

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