

Steele breathes new life into SCLC

By Maynard Eaton
THE ATLANTA VOICE

ATLANTA — Charles Steele, an electric, engaging funeral home owner and former Alabama state senator, has done in just over one year as SCLC's radical new president what most critics of the venerable Atlanta-based civil rights organization deemed improbable, if not impossible.

Not only has he been a breath of fresh air regarding activism, but Steele's magnetism and fund-raising mastery has brought the revered organization back from the brink of extinction and ridicule by refocusing its mission and meaning.

When he took office November 12, 2004, the lights were off, the phone was disconnected and the venerable organization launched by Dr. King and his top aides 48 years ago couldn't meet its payroll. The group was reeling from controversy and inner turmoil. Steele succeeded the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, who wrote a blistering resignation letter in which he proclaimed, "We have become our own worst enemy." Those were dark days.

"The Atlanta Journal Constitution had a headline saying SCLC was on the verge of collapse," Steele rue-

fully recalls. The subtitle was, "Only God can resurrect the dead." We didn't die, but we were on life support. Now we are breathing on our own."

"People were saying that we had lost our way, we haven't lost our way. We haven't had leadership that wanted to take us in the direction that Martin (Luther King Jr.) has already carved for us," says Rev. C.T. Vivian, a former high-ranking SCLC official and Dr. King confidant. "Martin King left us with an agenda; it just hasn't been followed. Martin was a prophet and prophets set the agenda for a proper future."

"Charles brought a vision and vigor that was sorely lacking," observes Alabama attorney Jock Smith of the Cochran Group. "SCLC is now in trusted hands."

Now, as a result of Steele's fervent fund raising and businessman's approach to the SCLC presidency, the group is debt free, back in the black, current with all its operating expenses and has not missed one payroll. During his brief tenure, Steele has raised some \$1.5 million. And Steele has already raised \$700,000 of the \$2 million pledged by the likes of SunTrust, Wachovia, Bank of America, Coca-Cola, Georgia Power and other major corporate

giants to finance an SCLC international headquarters on Auburn Avenue. The groundbreaking is set for Valentines Day, February 14, with SCLC's founders.

"It is a miracle," he says of SCLC's renaissance, "but I was led here by God. I can raise hell and I can raise money."

"It says to the entire nation that the most important organization that African Americans have had during the last half of the century is back in operation, and that we can carve our way and think through the next century under the principles of Martin King," says Dr. Vivian. "When we talk about SCLC, we're talking about a moral and spiritual movement."

This rebounding movement Steele has spearheaded has now gone international - particularly in the Middle East with offices in Israel and Palestine. "We're around the world," Steele says proudly. "I'll be going to Cuba in four or five weeks to set up a conflict resolution center. [In] Italy and throughout Europe we'll be going to establish conflict resolution centers."

The Tuscaloosa native admits there has been some criticism of his international forays and questioning whether SCLC is foregoing

pressing domestic concerns. "International concerns are domestic concerns because you are in a global society," Steele counters. "Our kids are going global; the jobs are abroad."

When Steele assesses what went wrong with SCLC and what contributed to its precipitous decline as a civil rights force in America, he says "We forgot our mission." The mission, he says, "is to stay in the streets; to advocate for the least of these. We left the streets and went to the suites. That's where we made our mistake. You never leave your base; you never abandon your cornerstone." Yet the charismatic politico is quick to quip, "It's a new day and a new way for SCLC."

Steele says poverty, violence and racism were the three societal ills that topped Dr. King's agenda and those are still the most pressing issues impacting black folks today.

"The Movement is still alive," Steele passionately contends. "But people are still waiting for a Dr. King to come back and he's not going to come back. But his spirit, and his teachings and his principles are here. But how can you teach his principles and theories if you don't have an institution, if you don't have [a robust] SCLC?"

Former D.C. mayor dogged by coke questions

By Valencia Mohammed
AFRO NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON — Howard University Hospital was a spectacle for some patients on Jan. 11, as a crowd of reporters gathered for an interview with former mayor-Marion S. Barry.

According to his physician, Dr. Robert H. Williams, lead physician at Howard, Barry was hospitalized for hypertension. He entered the hospital on Jan. 9 and was being discharged that same day.

While patients at the hospital stood around waiting for a quick glimpse of the mayor, Councilman Marion Barry (D-Ward 8) walked casually out of the hospital with his physician to address questions about his health.

As Barry walked closer to reporters the media frenzy began. "Are you in the hospital for treatment of your cocaine addiction? What is your response to what was in the paper today? Will you have to go back to jail?" asked several reporters.

In a calm demeanor Barry simply said, "My lawyer has instructed me not to comment on anything that was written in the paper today. I am here along with my doctor to address questions about my hospital stay."

Barry was alluding to a recent story that appeared in a daily newspaper earlier this month alleging in November last year he tested positive for cocaine and faces up to seven years in jail time for violation of his parole. According to the article, a magistrate in federal court ordered drug testing as a preliminary matter when Barry appeared for failing to file taxes for several years. Not filing taxes is a practice quite common in the District

by its residents in protest of "no taxation without representation."

However, the issue for many legal experts is violation of the privacy act. According to a representative of the courts, the executive branch of the court is forbidden from making public information about the results of drug testing. Barry's attorney could not be reached.

Although the local television anchors, especially Tom Sherwood, author of a book about the life of Marion Barry, kept pounding the former mayor of D.C. for answers to the allegations, he shrugged them off politely.

"Why can't I just live a normal life? I take good care of myself. Look at me. I eat

right. I exercise. I do what I am supposed to do to stay healthy. I am not God," said Barry.

"Yeah, but what about the dirty urine?" another reporter asked. Barry shook his head in disbelief.

According to a court services representative there is no court record of the "dirty urine" matter in district court. Nor was the federal court able to support the allegation. "We can not confirm that there is any court action taken or pending in the case of Mr. Marion Barry," said Dick Carelli, spokesman for the administrative office of the U.S. district courts.

Barry has undergone treatment for high blood pressure for over 20 years. Robinson

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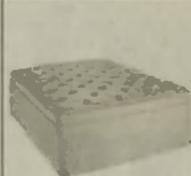
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Gaston East-West Connector Study

The N.C. Turnpike Authority and the N.C. Department of Transportation propose to improve east-west travel through Gaston County by constructing a new roadway between I-85 west of Gastonia and I-485/NC 160 in Mecklenburg County [TIP Project No. U-3321]. This workshop series will present maps and information on the alternatives to be studied in detail in the next phase of planning and design.

The N.C. Turnpike Authority is authorized to study, develop and construct up to 9 toll roads in the state. The Gaston East-West Connector is one of the projects under consideration for development as a toll road.

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4:30-8:00 pm
Hunter Huss High School
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- Mecklenburg County:**
Wednesday, February 1, 2006
4:30-8:00 p.m.
Olympic High School
4301 Sandy Porter Road
Charlotte, NC 28273
- East side of Gaston County:**
Thursday, February 2, 2006
4:30-8:00 p.m.
South Point High School
906 South Point Road
Belmont, NC 28012

NOTE: Participants are encouraged to drop in at any time between 4:30 and 8:00 p.m. for any of the workshops. All three workshops will present the SAME information and displays. The NCTA will provide auxiliary aids and services for disabled persons who wish to participate in the workshops. For more information or to receive special services, please call 1-800-475-6402. www.ncdot.org/projects/gastonconnector