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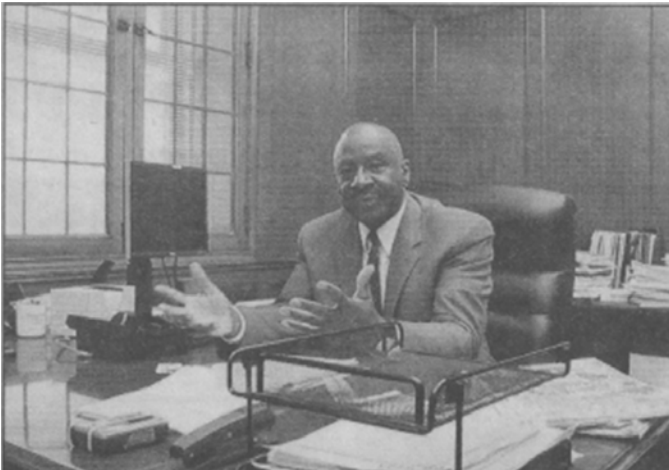
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January 10, 2007

### Nonprofit Carries on King's Poor People's Campaign

*CEDA's social service programs aim to lift people out of poverty*

by La Risa Lynch



CEDA President and CEO discusses how the country's largest nonprofit has its origins in Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign.

Capitalism.

That one word may symbolically be the reason why Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign failed to be realized in 1968.

"In our democracy, it promotes the capitalistic view that there is a need for a certain class of people in order to maintain that system," declared Robert Wharton, president and CEO of the Community and Economic Development Association (CEDA), the county's largest private nonprofit assisting the poor. "It's not viewed as a socialistic system where everybody is going to share the American dream."

Even with the much clichéd adage of "work hard and play by the rules" that still does not mean everyone will share," Wharton said. "The struggle has always been to make it more equal."

And 39 years later, after King launched the Poor People's campaign, economic justice for the poor is still a dream.

In 1967, King created the formulary for a multi-racial coalition to push for an economic bill of rights for the poor. That push became the Poor People's Campaign. It aimed to pressure the federal government to provide more low-income housing, jobs and livable wages.

But King would not live to see the campaign's launch. A month before it was to begin, King assassinated April 4, 1968 while in Memphis helping striking sanitation workers. But organizers of the campaign went ahead with it in the spirit of King's memory.

The campaign drew scores of people to Washington D.C., where they camped out in tents on the National Mall. Called Resurrection City, the camp at one point housed nearly 7,000 protesters. But the campaign failed to muster momentum or force a response from Congress. The assassination of Robert Kennedy during that time further sapped the campaign's spirit. It folded in June.

But CEDA, which provides housing, energy assistance and employment training to Cook County's poor, has its origins rooted in the idea in the Poor People's campaign. CEDA along with 1,000 community action agencies grew out of former President Lyndon B. Johnson's passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The act embodied King's civil rights efforts, and was Johnson's attempt to address poverty.

These community action agencies were to create programs that promoted health, education and the general welfare of the poor. But over the years, the federal government whittled away at these programs. Then the Ronald Regan administration eventually left these agencies to the mercy of the state for funding, which has continually been cut, Wharton contends.

"These policies act contrary to focus on lifting people up," he noted.

While capitalism may be the dominate reason for the continued state of the poor, Wharton added racism, classism and generational wealth also play a part.

"When I look at King's legacy and all that we have done... sometimes I have to ask myself how much has really changed versus what progress has really been made in terms of where we are?" Wharton queried.



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King's legacy has created laws in attempts to level the playing field, but conservatism on the U.S. Supreme Court and attacks on affirmative action such as in Michigan, chip away at those gains.

"These things are impacting the dream," he said. "There are setbacks. That is why we must continue to fight hard not to let those things happen, because it becomes a cycle of two steps forward two steps back."

However, Wharton cautioned that King's Poor People's Campaign was inclusive of all races and ethnic groups. To preclude poverty has ended because there are a few Oprah's and Robert Johnson's of the world is a fallacy, he added. This country, Wharton noted has more poor people today than during King's time in the civil rights era.

"Some people may say the war on poverty is dead. It is not totally dead. It could be much more alive if there was national visibility," Wharton said, noting that Hurricane Katrina's devastation of the Gulf Coast only put a temporary spotlight on the issue.

"For a moment, we thought poverty was going to be a national discussion, but it turned out to be a disaster in terms of things changing on the part of the (Bush) administration to address poverty in this country."

But when asked whose responsibility is it to lift people up out of poverty, Wharton noted that the debate wages on. However, he said the answer might lie between the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington espoused learning a trade, while Du Bois promoted education.

"Not everybody can go to college and not everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps," Wharton explained. "(But) part of King's legacy is ... that there are some people who need help bringing themselves up (if) they don't have any boot."

Missioned to help bring people to self-sufficiency, CEDA embodies King's Poor People's Campaign philosophy. CEDA aspires to lift people out of poverty by addressing the circumstances that entrap them in it. The 40-year-old agency offers employment, job training and entrepreneurial training for low-income residents who learn to start their own businesses. CEDA's entrepreneurial training for low-income

residents who learn to start their own businesses. CEDA's entrepreneurialship training program serviced 51 clients last year.

That is very much part of King's legacy of trying to get people to make their own decision by being more responsible for where they are," Wharton said.

While CEDA has been associated with the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), the agency does much more. To help spur job creation, CEDA offers two loan programs for business expansion or capital improvements that create new jobs for low-income residents. A business can receive a \$20,000 loan to defray that cost. Since 1983, CEDA has provided over \$6.5 million in low-interest loans that created 750 new jobs.

CEDA is in the forefront of education. It offers financial literacy, first-time homebuyers' seminars, Head Start classes and parenting classes that teach adults to advocate for their children. Through its Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program CEDA not only provides food assistance, but pre-natal classes as well.

"We try to create a foundation for people to become successful," Wharton said, noting that King's legacy is still alive, but Black people must remember to continue to move forward in spite of all these barriers we face."