

Harry Alford & Kay DeBow Alford



When Harry Alford wakes up each morning, he turns to his wife and issues this challenge: “Kay, let’s change the world,” he says.

It’s a lot more than a platitude. Through the National Black Chambers of Commerce, the organization the Alfords started 15 years ago, this couple has been credited with opening doors that have guided billions of dollars in new business to black entrepreneurs worldwide.

What Harry Alford and his wife, Kay DeBow Alford realized early on is that black entrepreneurship is one thing, but it takes real economic development to improve the quality of life for black people in the U.S. and around the world. That requires networking and a show of unity. Through the NBCC, the Alfords have provided a framework that has allowed many minority-owned companies to work and consult together, to speak in a collective voice as they take their place in the economic mainstream.

NBCC chapters nationwide have steered billions of dollars in contracts and jobs into predominantly black communities. Under the Alfords’ leadership, the NBCC has developed into an influential, global organization with a reach that extends to the White House and the top levels of corporate Americas

Their work – as well as their vision for the future – has earned them the inaugural Parren J. Mitchell Vanguard for Justice Award.

It all began in 1991. Harry, Indiana’s Deputy Commissioner for Minority Business, had distinguished himself by increasing minority business participation in the state by 500% in two years. “It occurred to me how different African American businesses were to Hispanic and Asian (Korean) owned companies. “The Hispanics and Koreans had an organization that represented their entrepreneurs as a group and that spoke in one voice. The African American business owners were not organized.”

Harry realized what Indianapolis needed a local black chamber of commerce. Alford quit his job and got the country’s first chapter “up and running in a year and half,” he said. Word spread quickly. “People were coming to Indianapolis to see what we were doing.” Then Alford had another epiphany. “It occurred to us that this void existed everywhere in the U.S - not just in Indiana. We decided to take the challenge and develop a national black chamber of commerce. We eventually raised enough money for Kay to quit her job and work with us fulltime.”

Today, the NBCC is also considered one of the leading advocates for international business development opportunities for Latin American, South American and African nations. Both Harry and Kay have developed ongoing trade initiatives with a host of countries, including Cuba. Harry is a board of director member of Chambers in Kenya and Ghana.

In 1993, the Alford’s incorporated the National Black Chamber of Commerce in Indianapolis and moved it to the nation’s capital by 1994. What began with 14 local chapters has grown to 130 chapters in 41 of 50 states as well as in Kenya, Ghana, Jamaica and the Bahamas. “We’re currently having dialogue with businessmen in Columbia and Brazil,” Harry Alford says. NBCC’s impact on minority business development has been chronicled nationwide. The Ohio Legislature recently appropriated \$1.2 million to fund two new Black Chambers in that state. “Our elected officials know how needed and valuable they (NBCCs) are,” Alford adds.

What do NBCC members get in return for their \$300 annual dues? “We give them our blueprints on how to establish their structure,” Harry says. “Once that has been established, we share best practices with them.” Each chapter also receives NBCC newsletters “telling them what’s happening nationally and worldwide, what to beware of, good legislation that could be emulated elsewhere and how to communicate with their elected officials.

Harry, a linebacker at Wisconsin in the late ‘60s, writes weekly columns for National Newspaper Publishers Association members across the country and is regularly called upon by Congress to testify on various legislative initiatives related to small business development, e-commerce, health care, social security reform, tax reform and global trade issues. Kay DeBow Alford, the daughter of a Tuskegee Airman and a University of Indiana graduate, is responsible for NBCC’s daily operations and its annual convention, which attracts members from more than 800 affiliates, government agencies and 100 major corporations.

The Alford’ met 27 years ago when they were both sales reps working in Indianapolis. He worked for Colgate and Kay was with Johnson and Johnson. “My boss introduced us,” says Kay. “We had lunch, lunch turned into dinner and then he told me I was the woman he had been looking for all of his life.” Together, they are an incredible fit. “The journey changes so often,” Kay says. Harry played certain roles and I played certain roles, but we lean on each other. Our lives are exciting. We never tire of the challenges.”

Their sons, twins Harry and Thomas, were outstanding lacrosse players at the University of Maryland. Harry, a 2007 Preseason Honorable Mention All-American, was considered one of the nation’s top goal keepers and is currently playing for the Chicago Machine. Thomas, a midfielder who was on the Dean’s List at Maryland, will try out for the Machine as well. The twins already have their own mail-order business. Christine’s Coffee is a specialty beverage from Kenya. “We even took them to the coffee fields in Kenya to assure them the workers were being treated and paid well,” said Kay. The twins are also involved in the operation of the NBCC. “They’ll tell you stories about how many envelopes they’ve had to lick,” Kay adds. “They and their friends actually ran our 15th annual convention in New Orleans.”

Former Congressman Parren J. Mitchell, Maryland’s first black Congressman, was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus and a champion of civil rights and minority business development. He died on Memorial Day, 2007, at age 85. As a congressman, he fought for legislation requiring local governments to set aside 10 percent of federal grants to hire minority contractors.

When Harry began thinking about a National Black Chamber of Commerce, Mitchell was one of the first people he consulted with. “He told us to go for it,” Alford says. “He said it we were committed and courageous, God would take care of the rest.

Mitchell will be sorely missed, Harry adds. “So far, nobody’s picked up his banner. And I miss him greatly. Politicians compromise and negotiate. Parren knew this nation needed and would not compromise. They don’t make them like him any more.”

Anthony Robinson, Esq.



Anthony Robinson likes to think of himself as a social engineer. For the past 25 years, he's devoted his life to constructing bridges of legal support for the country's minority business community.

As a civil rights attorney and president of the Washington, D.C.-based Minority Business Enterprise Legal Defense and Education Fund (MBELDEF), Robinson has been a small business crusader, a national advocate and legal representative for minority entrepreneurs. Throughout his career, he has championed cases designed to terminate discrimination in the marketplace and prevent large companies from ignoring the set-aside rights of minority firms. He's following the mandate issued by his role model, Charles Hamilton Houston, one of the greatest civil rights lawyers in U.S. history. "He said that once they pursue a career in law, African American attorneys should dedicate themselves to improve the quality of life for African Americans in the U.S.," Robinson said. "That's the model I decided to emulate."

The Minority Business Enterprise Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. is a national, non-profit, public interest law firm founded in 1980 by former U.S. Congressman Parren J. Mitchell. The cases MBELDEF's pursued were intended to achieve equity and fairness for minority businesses in the U.S. marketplace.

In 1983, Mitchell, Robinson's longtime friend and mentor "shared with me that he was contemplating retirement from Congress," Robinson said. "This was in the early days of Reagan Administration and Parren knew he couldn't depend on the Justice Department to represent the interests of minority business. So he decided to create his own Justice Department." In 1984, Robinson left his private practice to become the first full-time President and Chief Executive Officer of MBELDEF. His work and dedication to this unique agency has earned him a Parren Mitchell Vanguard for Justice Award.

MBELDEF seems a fitting part of Robinson's legacy. He grew up poor in Clarksville, Tennessee and experienced life in the segregated south during the 50s and early 60s. Both of Robinson's parents were educators and "it was a foregone conclusion that I would go to college," he said.

In 1957, during his sophomore year at Morgan State "I went to a student rally and heard a speech by Stokely Carmichael (Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). 'To Have an Undying Love for Black people.' changed my life," Robinson said. "I went into Morgan as biology major but after his speech, I changed my major to political science." The day after hearing Carmichael, Robinson met Parren Mitchell who was planning to become Maryland's first black Congressman. "He asked me to help on his campaign," said Robinson. "I became his driver. I would hear him speak and saw how he navigated the political landscape. I helped with his bumper stickers and his yard signs and went with him when he campaigned door to door."

At that point in his life, Robinson had never met a black lawyer. "Parren told me about Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall and other legal giants of the civil rights movement," Robinson said. "He's the one who planted the idea."

After earning his B.S. from Morgan State, Robinson earned a law degree from Washington College of Law at American University in 1973. He was legal counsel for the United States Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission from 1972 to 1975 and an attorney for Singleton, Dashiell and Robinson - a law firm he co-founded - until he took over as president of MBELDEF 10 years later.

During MBELDEF's heyday, "the staff was relatively small," said Robinson, a married father of two. "At our peak in the early nineties, we had four to five attorneys on staff. I went around the country and recruited more than 160 other attorneys to work with us. We called it the National Lawyers Panel. Most did the work pro bono but in a few instances, we pulled together business people to help fund the cases that involved more proactive litigation."

During his 25 year tenure "It was always difficult surviving but we had our share of accomplishments," Robinson said. "They took us seriously because they took Parren Mitchell seriously. We fought three cases all the way to the Supreme Court (Fullilov vs. Klutznich, JA Croson vs. The City of Richmond and Adarand vs. Pena). Whenever there were challenges to programs at the local, state and federal government, we intervened to make sure the interest of minority business was adequately represented."

Today, Robinson is MBELDEF's only fulltime staffer. "This is virtual organization," says Robinson. "I do what I can to keep the door open but it's only a shell of what it used to be. Because it's just me - the caseload is very light, only three to four cases. But we have the support of the students who work with the Civil Rights Litigation Clinic at Howard University School of Law."

One recent case, filed on behalf of historically black colleges in Maryland, "accuses the state of being in violation of a five-year old consent decree between the Office of Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Education," Robinson said. "Maryland was supposed to make the programs and facilities at HBCU comparable to those at white institutions. It hasn't happened yet."

At Mitchell's funeral, Robinson talked about how much the former Congressman "influenced and inspired me. I told them he didn't just do it for me, he did it for a lot of people. He believed in giving young people a chance and always encouraged and supported them."

When people ask me how they can help carry on Mitchell's work, "I tell them can rebuild the organization he started and give it the opportunity to be what he wanted it to be," Robinson said. "I tell them racial and ethnic discrimination is still a problem in this country and the need for vigilance and advocacy on behalf of minority businesses is greater today than it has ever been. I remind them we no longer have the institutional advocate in place on the Hill, in the courts protecting their interests at a time when we need it most - when more businesses and industries are doing more things. I say the big challenge now is to develop strategies that allow minority firms to build capacity and go after even larger opportunities."

In other words, minority business advocates "can't get complacent and let their guard down," Robinson said. "There's still a lot of work that needs to be done, a huge amount of work."