

By Sam L. Polk Sr., Ed.D.

An African American EXPERIENCE *in APPA*

I was born in 1945 in Jackson, Mississippi, during a period of social segregation. I grew up during the challenging years of profound racial injustice and inequality, and participated in the struggle to win the rights we now share in America. I was motivated by leaders who gave of themselves for the good of others: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Benjamin E. Mays, W.E.B. Dubois, and Booker T. Washington.

We have come a long way from the troublesome days of the 1960s, but even today many challenges still remain. When I became convinced that APPA was the place for my success in the facilities management field, I wanted to see African Americans and more HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) take advantage of these opportunities.



Left: President Chris Ahoy presents Sam with the 2007 Meritorious Service Award. Center: Sam studied drafting at Jackson State University. Right: An early portrait.

During my time in high school and college from 1960 to 1968, I took industrial arts courses along with languages, science, and math. Subsequently, I earned a B.S. degree in industrial arts education at Jackson State University (JSU) in Jackson, Mississippi. It was a common practice for my professors to use the campus as a teaching laboratory, overseeing classes in studying, repairing, and constructing physical infrastructure and facilities. This training afforded me a great understanding and appreciation of the built environment and its importance to the educational mission of the university.

In 1973, following tenure in industry as the first African American design draftsman for the Shell Oil Company in New Orleans, and a three-year stint in the U.S. Army as a map compiler, I was offered a job as instructor of industrial arts drafting at Jackson State University. In 1974, I became coordinator of JSU's new design construction technology program. Following the example of my professor and using the campus as a teaching laboratory, I was commissioned to design and construct, with the help of students, the Centennial Capsule Monument and Centennial Tree and Bell monuments, and also surveyed utilities, walks and roadways, landscape structures, and scale models of four different periods of the university's development. Serving on building committees and project overviews allowed me to gain even greater knowledge of the campus physical plant.

I earned the Doctorate in Education from Mississippi State University in 1986, specializing in vocational education and educational leadership. In 1988, I was offered the position of director of physical plant and assistant professor of technology at JSU. In 1991, I accepted the position of director of facilities management at Tennessee State University in Nashville. From 1988 to 2008, I participated in APPA and introduced African

Americans and other groups to APPA, helping to establish an incentive for others to continue this initiative for diversity.

INTRODUCTION TO APPA

In July 1988, I attended my first APPA meeting, the 75th Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. More than 1,400 members attended APPA's first meeting in the nation's capital. Special highlights included a keynote addresses by Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, a series of workshops on critical issues in higher education, and a presentation of the results of the joint APPA/NACUBO study of capital renewal and deferred maintenance at our nation's colleges and universities.

As a new director, I was extremely impressed with the educational sessions and confident that I had found my go-to resource for assistance. The one element that troubled me was the small number of African American participants. I could literally count these members on one hand. However, it was clear that through its 75-year history, APPA had kept up with the growth of colleges and universities and often led many changes. It was also evident that APPA's greatest accomplishments had been the ability to grow professionally, keep pace with new technologies and procedures, and direct more revenue to the facilities function.

Both the presence and participation of African Americans at the conferences left much to be desired. However, I was determined to see what I could do to change this situation. The words of Mahatma Gandhi became my inspiration: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

I understood that the racial issues needed to be addressed, even though approaching them might be difficult. My central concern was whether minority facilities professionals knew about APPA and how they could be encouraged to share their information in this forum. I was determined to act on this concern. I also knew that I had to take the lead.

Following the 1991 conference in Orlando, Florida, I sent a message to HBCU institutions and individual African American leaders as soon as I got back to my office. I offered to assist them to learn more about APPA as a valuable resource for campus facilities and to help them become more involved in the organization.

Over time, we made substantial progress in demonstrating the potential of *all* APPA members. Moreover, we had the opportunity to illustrate how African Americans can encourage even more African American participation in the organization.



Left: Sam served three years in the U.S. Army.
Right: Sam and his father in 1950s Mississippi.

ELECTED FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN TO THE SRAPPA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

In 1995 I joined the SRAPPA Board of Directors in the office of newsletter editor. While in that role I conducted a study of the participation of HBCUs in APPA and the six APPA regional associations.

My report of this study was published in *Facilities Manager* magazine (January/February 1999). Following are a few of the results for the Southeastern region:

- There were 80 HBCUs in the 11 states in SRAPPA; of these, only 19 HBCUs held current membership.
- Of the HBCUs responding to the survey, 30 percent had little or no knowledge of SRAPPA.
- Fifteen percent of the HBCUs indicated that the lack of black officers had a great effect on continued membership; 20 percent were greatly affected with the low number of blacks in attendance at annual conferences; and 17 percent wanted more HBCU issues addressed.
- Fifty-seven percent said black leadership must be increased, and 64 percent said recruitment of HBCUs was necessary. Sixty-eight percent indicated that they must determine the value of involvement in APPA.

I published another article on HBCU institutions in the March/April 2005 issue of *Facilities Manager*.

ELECTED THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN VICE PRESIDENT FOR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

I served on the Education Committee for a number of years, working closely with Jim Roberts, then-Vice President for Educational Programs. Jim and I had served on the SRAPPA Board of Directors for a number of years. Jim’s term as SRAPPA president was coming to an end and he urged me to run for the APPA vice presidency. I recall saying to Jim, “Do you think APPA is ready to elect an African American as Vice President for Educational Programs?” Jim said, “Sam, it’s about what you can do for APPA and the Education Committee, and I don’t think the fact that you are an African



Having fun at SRAPPA; from left: Bill Elvey, Bob McMains, Sam, Mike Davis, David Gray, and Phil Cox.

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I was confident of my abilities and knew that securing this position would open a great opportunity to work on diversity within the APPA governing board. I was notified by the nomination committee chair that the APPA membership had chosen me as the new vice president—the first African American to serve in this capacity.

NOMINATED FOR THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT

In accordance with my plans to retire within five years, it was critical for me to accept the APPA nominating committee’s suggestion to run for APPA’s President-Elect. Over the years, I have paid close attention to the requirements for this office: credible service, proven leadership, and commitment and dedication to APPA’s regional and state chapters. Throughout my association, I felt that my background was equal to any other member who was elected president.

My platform was straightforward. A representation of this message follows:

As President-Elect I will continue the initiatives of past presidents and lead a three-year effort to 1) achieve true diversity, 2) actively recruit all institutions of higher learning, 3) make learning, teaching, and service opportunities more accessible to our diverse membership, and 4) ask all members and elected officials to give their best in service. These targeted goals are designed to reenergize the membership and bring cohesion among members

and elected officers to enhance success in implementing APPA’s key strategies. When they are accomplished, APPA will be positioned to better meet the changing needs of higher education facilities professionals.

It was my goal to engage the membership, especially elected officers, to a renewed sense of ownership of APPA. If we own it, we’ll love it; and if we love it, we’ll work for it. The four goals I listed in my platform statement remain critical for APPA’s continued success. I was unsuccessful in my bid to be APPA President, and I felt that APPA had missed a significant opportunity to advance the cause of diversity.

SUMMARY

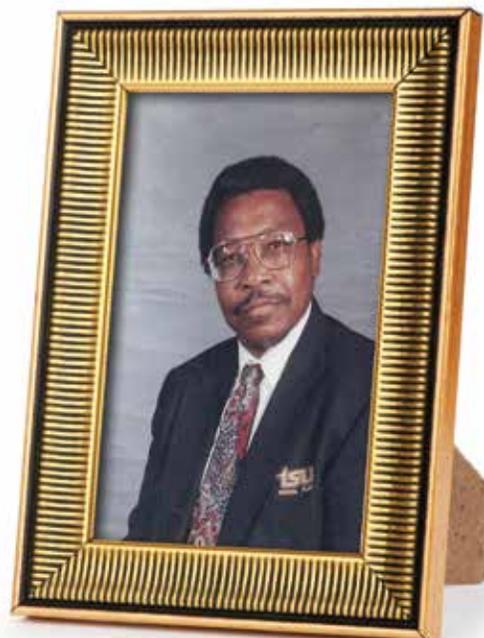
When I started my facilities management career at Jackson State University, the challenge was simple: to motivate and improve the technical capability of staff to provide clean and safe facilities, to oversee renovation and capital construction, and to accomplish these ends with meager funds. Nothing was simple about accomplishing that task.

While in the education arena, I knew there had to be a professional organization for those serving as educational physical plant administrators. I learned about APPA and was confident

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Above: Sam and his Tennessee State University leadership team.
Right: A formal portrait while at TSU.



that my continued association with APPA would help me get what I needed to accomplish the mission of my university's president.

In 1988, when I got involved with APPA and SRAPPA, I found what appeared to me to be "a good old boys' club." I could count the number of women and African Americans on one hand. This troubled me greatly. As I began to reap the benefits of membership, I also accepted the challenge to do what I could to increase diversity, especially among the 105 HBCUs.

More than 25 years since my first encounter with APPA and as facility director, I'm even more convinced that association with APPA, its regional associations, and the state and local chapters is essential for facilities managers.

As a member of APPA, an African American, and a representative of HBCUs, I felt a tremendous obligation to exceed normal expectations. I wanted to create pathways that would lead to greater HBCU participation, thereby leading APPA to a stronger future.

This article was written not only to highlight one person's professional path, but to provide a base for continuous growth and advancement of diversity in APPA and its regional associations. This goal is not impossible; in the words of Tommy Lasorda, "The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a man's determination."

APPA has afforded me an opportunity to assume leadership positions, present papers at annual conferences, and receive recognition for services, publications, and research projects. All of this allows me to have a keen sense of self-worth. In a way, it puts a stamp of validation on what I did as facility professional. APPA helped me to be considered at my university not just as a provider of services, but as a partner in the educational, research, and service missions to the university.

A successful and inclusive APPA must be judged not only by the caliber of officers, the quality of services, and the size of its membership, but by the commitment to diversity from top to bottom. Our promotion of full participation for African Americans in APPA

was continuous and significant. Although much has been accomplished, the work is still unfinished. If these goals are to be fulfilled, they must be championed and fully embraced by all of APPA. ☺

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