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James S. Avery, Sr. – A Lifetime of Service

by Vic Bary

Growing up in Cranford

Jim Avery was born March 24, 1923 in a 1,200 square foot house at 47 Johnson Avenue that his father had built in 1904. He was the youngest sibling of four brothers and a sister.

Both his parents were born in Virginia (his father to a former slave) and had limited educations. His father was illiterate and did odd jobs around town. His mother worked as a maid for the Denman family (who kept Jim in shoes with hand-me-downs). Jim remembered Johnson Avenue as a mixed-race Blue Collar neighborhood where everyone socialized and got along

In spite of their limited educations, both his parents stressed the value of education, as well as the importance of hard work and religious values. Jim attributed his later successes to their influence. He fell in love with reading in 5th grade and was regularly driven after school to the Cranford Library by one of his teachers riding in the rumble seat of her car.

Jim would excel at both academics and sports while at Cranford High School. He was a varsity running back, quarterback and kicker for the CHS football team (he was named second best quarterback in New Jersey and first among Group 2 schools) and was State Group 2 220 low hurdles champion. In academics he was National Honor Society, named class president, and in the Spring of 1941, was one of only two students to receive a Union County academic scholarship to attend Columbia University. His mother died that Spring before he left for Columbia.

Columbia University and Military Service

Upon arrival at Columbia, Jim once again busied himself with sports - football, basketball and track, while also excelling academically and working on the side. When his nation went to war in December of that year, Jim felt the call to serve.

In early 1942, with a number of Columbia friends, Jim applied to the Marine Corps officer candidate program. Jim was rejected (the Marines did not accept Blacks). Later in 1942 he joined an Army Reserve unit with call-up to be at the end of the school year 1943.



(Photo Courtesy Wheatmark Publications)

Corporal James Avery

Jim would serve with segregated Army Air Corps units in various personnel positions. He said the United States Army was his first encounter with overt segregation. While in the service he was again active in sports and sung with a group called the “Dreamers”. He married Sue Butler in April, 1945, and was released from service in February, 1946.

Back to Columbia and then Teaching

Jim returned to Columbia to complete his undergraduate degree, and then went on to a master’s degree in History. In 1949, Jim contacted Cranford Superintendent of Schools H. R. Best. Best remembered him favorably as a student and offered him a job at Cranford High School teaching Social Studies. Jim believed he was the first Black teacher in Cranford, and perhaps in all of Union County.

In 1951 Jim added coaching several athletic teams to his duties. In 1954 he was made head of the Social Studies program. He and Sue had divorced while he was working on his master’s degree. In 1954 he married Margaret Nunn of Summit. They bought a house in Plainfield and later moved to Scotch Plains. They would have a daughter, Sheryl, and a son, James S. Jr. (In 1972 Margaret moved out leaving Jim to raise his two children).

In 1955 Kenilworth named Jim Young Man of the Year. That same year, Esso Standard Oil offered Jim a position as head of education and race relations in an 8-state marketing area. He accepted the position effective with the end of the 1956 spring school term.

Esso and Union County

It was at Esso that Jim became so highly involved with the issues of promoting educational opportunity for young Black males (it was the 1950s) and expanding awareness of under-served Black markets. He worked in Manhattan but lived in Plainfield. It was in Plainfield that some of his White Collar neighbors acquainted him with the Omega Psi Phi Black service fraternity. As he made clear in his 2006 autobiography Others Thought I Could Lead (the initial book signing for which was sponsored by the Cranford Historical Society), Omega became the most important factor in his service efforts for the rest of his working life.

At home in Union County, Jim became active with the Union County Psychiatric Clinic, the Evening School Council, the Local Assistance Board, the Human Relations Council's Housing Committee and Frontiers International. In 1958 Esso's Public Relations Department produced a film "The Cranford Story" emphasizing the oil industry's contributions to science instruction. It was distributed to science teachers and public television stations.

Humble Oil and Exxon: An Expanded Reach

In 1960 Humble Oil took over marketing activities for Esso (allowing Esso to market beyond the limited 18-state area agreed to in a 1911 Supreme Court decision against it.) Esso would rebrand itself 10 years later as Exxon to connote this wider reach.

Humble Oil gave Jim a wider geographical reach. In 1956 he had joined the National Association of Market Developers (NAMD), a group devoted to expanding the Black Market. He became its president in 1963 and its chairman of the board in 1967. In 1956 he had become a member of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), becoming its vice chairman in 1966. During his tenure with UNCF, Humble Oil's grants to UNCF rose from \$50,000 per year to \$150,000 per year.

In 1965 Jim was invited to join the Task Force on Youth Motivation (under the Plans for Progress program). He accepted and was named vice chairman of its Advisory Council. The 65 Black executives would visit predominantly Black high schools and colleges and stress the increasing opportunities in business and industry. In 1967 he was named Chairman of the Advisory Council.



(Photo Courtesy Wheatmark Publications)

Congratulated by President Johnson

In 1971 Humble renamed its Public Relations department the Public Affairs Department and named Jim Manager for his region. Energy supply and environmental issues would be the main focus. In 1977 he was named Vice-Chairman of Public Affairs for the American Petroleum Institute Offshore Subcommittee.

In 1977 Jim married his executive secretary, Joan Horrigan. Shortly after, Exxon closed his Pelham, NY office and moved the operations to Connecticut. Jim moved the family from Scotch Plains to West Hartford. When Exxon closed the Connecticut office several years later and moved operations to Texas, Jim joined the Loaned Executive program at Exxon. He was placed with the Council of Municipal Performance (COMP).



(Photo Courtesy Wheatmark Publications)

Jim and Joan

Jim returned to Exxon in 1983 as a Senior Public Affairs Consultant and retired from Exxon in 1986 after 31 years with them. In 1983 he and his family had returned to Scotch Plains.

In the 1970s Jim had worked with PRIME, a program that identified high potential students in Camden and Philadelphia and provided extra educational opportunities such as summer study programs at local universities. He became Vice Chair of PRIME in 1989 and remained in that position until 1992.

Omega Psi Phi and Local Honors

Jim headed Omega Psi Phi's Second District as District Representative. In 1967 he was elected First Vice Grand Basileus (national VP) on an activist platform. He was elected Grand Basileus in 1970. He placed particular emphasis on drug abuse (Project Uplift) and community health. In 1972, his Project Aspiration focused on higher education goals.

Jim was invited to speak in 1986 at Cranford's First Baptist Church 100th anniversary, where Dr. Deborah Cannon Wolfe was associate minister.



(Photo Courtesy Wheatmark Publications)

With Dr. Deborah Cannon Wolfe

In 1998 Jim was inducted into the Cranford Sports Hall of Fame and his photograph displayed on the “Wall of Fame” in the Cranford High School gymnasium. In 2000 Jim was one of 7 former Cranford residents selected for an award from the Cranford Fund for Education Excellence and the Cranford High School Alumni Awards Committee acknowledging their significant contributions to in education and community endeavors.

National Recognition and Honors

In 2006, Jim Avery received the Jackie Robinson Foundation ROBIE award for lifetime achievement as an African-American trailblazer in corporate America.

In 1993 governor Jim Florio appointed Jim to the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) board of directors. He would chair the board 1997-2000. In 1992, Jim was invited to serve on the Lincoln University Board of Trustees. Founded in 1854, Lincoln is the oldest historically Black American college/university. He served on the board for two 4-year terms.

Final Thoughts

Jim Avery died May 3, 2011 at age 88. He was interred in Fairview Cemetery.

To recount all Jim Avery’s accomplishments and service to others would require far more space than this newsletter allows. What stands out most strongly about his life was his fierce devotion to service to others, together with his insistence on the importance of education, personal effort, and personal values.

Sources

1. *Avery, James S. Senior, Others Thought I could Lead, Wheatmark, Tucson, AZ, 2006.*
2. *“Cranford Chronicle”, various.*
3. *“The Eagle”, 6/30/2005.*
4. *<http://obit.demarcofuneralhome.com/obitdisplay.html/?task-Print&id=926749&listing>.*
5. *Murray, Leslie, “A National Pioneer, with Deep Roots in Cranford”, “Cranford Chronicle”, 10/06/2006.*
6. *Obit., “Newark Star-Ledger”, May 4, 2011.*