

Historical Contributions

Experience of Elders

Frank Callen

Savannah, GA

1917-1954

Today, Savannah, Georgia is a calm and picturesque port city on the Atlantic. Many of its buildings are ornate, historic and draped in mystical Spanish moss. A popular tourist destination that is among the New South's gems of race relations, Savannah in 1915 was quite a different story, particular for African-Americans. This was, after all, a mere fifty years after the end of the Civil War. The foundation of Savannah's commerce had been built around the labor-intensive business of farming rice and on the bustling port of Savannah. For more than a century, this port was also the entry point and auction site for enslaved Africans. The descendants of these enslaved peoples are a large portion of Savannah's population today. In 1915, segregation was the strictly enforced law of the land; it lay thick, plentiful and heavy as the moss on the Savannah trees. It was quite a different time.

The Savannah of 1915 is the world where we find Frank Callen, an African-American of tremendous vision, courage and dedication. Callen was a truant officer assigned to Savannah's poor African-American communities. He quickly recognized that the youth in these communities had little supervision or organized constructive options during the non-school hours. Not only was the only existing youth center in town not conveniently located, it was segregated. Callen decided that he wanted to help the children he worked with every day grow beyond their immediate circumstances. He wanted more than his job offered - catching young people and punishing them - and set out to help improve the lives of those who had the least. After rallying support, mostly from black professionals in the community, he organized and opened the Savannah Boys Club in 1917 and served as director. This organization became a Federated Boys' Clubs affiliate in 1922 (a precursor to Boys & Girls Clubs of America), making it one of the oldest Clubs in the South.

Callen led the Club for decades. His tireless work to improve the lives of young people and his community didn't go unnoticed. After his death in 1954, the Club was renamed the Frank Callen Boys Club in his honor. Recently, the main building of the Frank Callen Boys & Girls Club (510 Charleston Street) underwent a major \$750,000 expansion and renovation. The organization's three facilities annually serve 1,500 of Savannah's youth from disadvantaged circumstances with a variety of quality programs and dedicated, trained staff. A restored and enlarged photo of Frank Callen is prominently displayed in the entry foyer of the main Clubhouse. People who knew Callen recognize the look pride, one that Callen displayed every time the daily throng of happy kids burst in from school.

Frank Callen left a legacy for us all to follow, one that demonstrates what can happen when a committed few are determined to make a difference. Those of us in the Boys & Girls Club Movement must pick up where he left off - paving new roads and creating opportunities for young people where there appear to be none. Our youth deserve it and our nation's future depends on it.

This article is an adaptation from a 2001 SOOAP Newsletter article by Tim Richardson, Senior Director, Boys & Girls Clubs of America and Nathaniel Glover, former CPO, Frank Callen Boys & Girls Club

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