

African American Christian Contributors: Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

Angelica A. Fleming

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Biographical Information

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was born on November 29, 1908 in New Haven, Connecticut, the second child of Mattie Fletcher Schaffer and Adam Clayton Powell Sr. Both of his parents were of mixed race and were born poor in the Virginia Area. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s father worked his way out of poverty through attending Wayland Seminary, a historically black college, graduate study at Yale University and Virginia Seminary. In the year of his son's birth, Powell Sr. was called as the pastor of the prominent Abyssinian Baptist Church in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. He led the church for decades through major expansion. Due to his father's achievements, Powell grew up in a wealthy household in New York City.

Achievements

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. attended Townsend Harris High School. He went on to attend City College before transferring to Colgate University in Hamilton, New York, where he graduated in 1930. Two years later (1932), he earned a Master's degree in Religious Education from Columbia University. Powell Jr. furthered his divinity studies at Shaw University. He was the first person of African-American descent to be elected from New York to Congress. (Adam Clayton Powell Jr., n.d.). In 1938, Powell Jr. took over as Head Pastor for his father. He became the pastor of the largest protestant congregation in the United States. His activism on the part of the community led him to run for the New York City Council and he was elected in 1941, becoming the first Black to serve on the Council. After serving the House of Representatives for

15 years, Powell was finally granted a committee chairmanship in 1961 when he became the Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a cofounder of the National Negro Congress; He was elected as a Democrat to the Seventy-ninth and to the eleven succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1945 - February 28, 1967).

Contributions

Powell began assisting his father with charitable services at the church, while serving as a preacher. During the Great Depression, Powell became a prominent civil rights leader in Harlem. Through his crusades for jobs and affordable housing, he developed a formidable public following in the community. As chairman of the Coordinating Committee for Employment, Powell Jr. used numerous methods of community organizing. He worked to bring political pressure on major businesses to open their doors to black employees at professional levels. He organized mass meetings, rent strikes and public campaigns to force companies, utilities, and Harlem Hospital, which operated in the community, to hire black workers at skill levels higher than the lowest positions. During the 1939 New York World's Fair, Powell organized a picket line at the Fair's offices in the Empire State Building. As a result, the number of black employees increased from approximately 200 to 732. In 1941, Powell Jr. led a bus boycott in Harlem; the Transit Authority hired 200 black workers and set the precedent for more. Powell also led a fight to have drugstores operating in Harlem hire black pharmacists.

Beliefs

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. encouraged local residents to shop only where blacks were hired to work. "Mass action is the most powerful force on earth," Powell once said, adding, "as

long as it is within the law, it's not wrong; if the law is wrong, change the law." Powell Jr. was never one to shun away from the spotlight. He was an outspoken minister and politician; regarded as an irritant by many of his congressional colleagues. Powell Jr. relished his position as a spokesperson for the advancement of African American rights. Although Powell fought tirelessly on behalf of minorities, his legal problems and unpredictable behavior eventually undermined his influential but controversial political career. "Keep the faith, baby; spread it gently and walk together, children," was a legendary slogan of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was the most powerful black politician of his time. Like many great men, he himself became his most destructive opponent. In April 1972, Powell's health began failing and he was hospitalized in Miami. He died on April 4, 1972 due to acute prostatitis, an inflammation of the prostate gland. His funeral was held at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Over the years, several public schools have been named after Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Seventh Avenue, north of Central Park in New York City was renamed Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard. However, his real legacy is of a confident black political figure, especially at times were many blacks were afraid to speak out against racism and poverty. He was a bright and engaging leader who would not back down from his opponents and led the fight to change things in a turbulent society. Most of all, he is a man who opened the doors for other minority politicians in the United States Congress.

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