

New NAACP chief takes office Monday

JOEL C. THOMPSON jthompson@ctpost.com
Article Last Updated: 12/31/2006 04:43:09 AM EST

Craig Kelly is the newly elected president of the Greater Bridgeport chapter of the NAACP....

BRIDGEPORT - Craig Kelly felt the sting of racism at an early age, growing up in Father Panik Village, which was then a sprawling public housing complex on the city's East Side. "I first became aware of racism while I was 9 years old and shining shoes for a quarter," Kelly said. "As I was on my knees and buffing his shoes, a white guy would say, 'Pop that rag, nigger.' I'd leave a little polish on his socks in retribution."

Kelly, now 56, in his teens joined the Black Panthers during the late 1960s, a reflection of his growing interest in fighting for the cause of black equality.

But, Kelly, a retired city firefighter, takes on a new role in the black community Monday when he is sworn in as the new president of the Greater Bridgeport chapter of the NAACP. Bishop Ivory W. Holden will preside at the ceremony, set for 11 a.m. in the Holy Tabernacle Church of God in Christ, 2271 North Ave.

Kelly was elected president of the chapter in November, defeating Carolyn Nah by a 45-43 vote in her quest for an eighth, two-year term.

Kelly hopes to attract more area people to participate in NAACP, while drawing on his experience and knowledge to enhance the organization and its mission.

Mary Bruce, a former City Council member who campaigned for Kelly, said she will be a member of his executive board.

"He'll work on some things we need to take care of while we broaden our membership base," Bruce said.

As chapter president, Kelly said he will initially emphasize three major points, including: the need for parents to be involved in their children's education; ensuring a share in the city's economic development for blacks and other minorities, and better community relations with police.

"Black people have a lot of problems and look to others to solve them," said Kelly, who is now a professional counselor. "They need to develop self-respect and the ability to control their own destiny."

He said he aims to establish a continuing dialog on race, concerning where people of color stand economically, socially and politically.

"If we believe in the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s process of confronting the system and speaking truth to power, we have to step up to the plate and make a difference," Kelly said. "I'm hoping to make a tremendous difference, but that can only be possible through people working with me."

The Harlem-born Kelly moved to Bridgeport at an early age and is the product of a broken home. A single parent of three sons, he takes pride in his role as a father figure.

"I never knew my father. Mother lived in Harlem, and I visited her there. But I was raised by grandmother in Father Panik," he said of his childhood.

When Kelly's grandmother died in 1965 when he was 15, he was taken to the city's juvenile detention center, where he stayed for about five months before he was assigned by the state to live in one of a series of foster families until he was 21.

"During that period, I joined the Black Panthers," Kelly said. "It was a time when we were developing a sense of consciousness and pride as a race."

He worked with the Panthers who locally organized a free breakfast program, health and legal clinics, as well as political-education classes.

"He was a regular kid, but he was strong on racial relations," said Rodock Cox, who was Kelly's foster father in 1967. "He still visits me, and we go to ball games."

While in the Black Panthers, Kelly was arrested in July 1970 on a charge of conspiracy to possess explosives along with Lawrence E. Townsend, the president of the local Panther chapter, and James Murphy, another Panther member. They were found with a gasoline bomb with a firecracker detonator in a paper bag at Father Panik Village.

After Townsend pleaded guilty to the charge, Kelly said the charge against him was dropped. It is one of several times that Kelly has been arrested.

In another case, he and a friend went to visit a student at the University of Bridgeport to buy marijuana, he said, but the friend pulled out a gun and instead robbed the student.

Kelly and his friend were charged with robbery. He was convicted of the charge, but served only five months in prison, the time he was incarcerated awaiting trial.

Regarding that incident, he said he had no idea that his friend had planned an armed holdup and unfortunately got caught up in the crime.

"I've learned from my mistakes and moved on. None of us is perfect. I wouldn't be who I am today if I hadn't gone through those things," Kelly said.

As a result, in his role as a single father after his first wife passed away, Kelly said he was determined to make sure his sons took education seriously and lived good lives.

One son, Malik, is a physician in residence at the University of Connecticut Medical Center in Farmington, while another son, Jamal, works with school children in Richmond, Va., as a substance-abuse prevention specialist in that city's Behavioral Health Authority.

"In working with kids for more than 10 years, I have realized my father was a great parent," Jamal Kelly, 34, said. "He balanced nurturing with firmness. He would reward us for good behavior, but there were repercussions for bad behavior."

Kelly's third son, Isaiah, from his second marriage, is an elementary school student who lives in Atlanta with his mother, from whom Kelly is divorced. Kelly said he flies to Atlanta often to visit Isaiah.

Raised as a Catholic by his grandmother, Kelly said he also has been influenced by the Nation of Islam, now led by Louis Farrakhan.

He participated in the 1995 "Million Man March" on Washington, D.C., led by Farrakhan, who used the event to urge black men to take responsibility for their lives and raising their children.

"What's important is your personal relationship with God and how you can impact others," Kelly said. "You learn to step out in faith and make a difference."

He said he was greatly influenced by reading the biography of the late Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X, one of 300 books on black history and political thought that he owns.

As he pulled his life together, Kelly earned a bachelor's degree in 1979 in elective studies from the University of Bridgeport, followed by a master's degree in counseling from the school in 1980.

Kelly also filed a federal suit in 1975, along with nine other men, in his quest to be hired by the Fire Department. At the time, there were no minority firefighters in the city.

After a court fight, Kelly was hired as a firefighter in 1980. He served in the department until 2004 when he retired as a lieutenant. In 1983, he was instrumental in founding the Firebird Society of Bridgeport to support black fighters.

In 2003 shortly before he retired, Kelly and some friends produced a film, "All Our Sons - Fallen Heroes of 9/11," about the dozen black New York City firefighters who died while saving others in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City.

The film, chronicling the firefighters' lives through their mother's memories, has been broadcast on PBS television stations throughout the nation since 2004.

Kelly said the idea for the film arose after he met the firefighters' mothers as a counselor, helping them cope with the tragedy.

He also spent considerable time in New Orleans a year ago, helping people recover from Hurricane Katrina.

"Kelly came up the hard way, but he's prepared to deal with real issues as NAACP president," said Ernie Parker, president of Intercity Violence Prevention on Stratford Avenue, which promotes conflict resolution with the help of a boxing program.

Parker said he got to know the new NAACP leader while Kelly worked for him as a counselor in the Upward Bound program from 1970-74.

Kelly, reflecting on his life experience and work as a counselor, said black people need to know much more about themselves, personally and historically, to build character and gain self respect.

"Black people know very little about themselves as manifested by their lack of self respect and how they treat each other," he said. "They need to know Africa was the cradle of civilization and that they are the descendants of great people."