

U.S. Army Europe chief of staff joins in sharing experiences, memories at NAACP anniversary event

Story courtesy Rhein-Neckar Branch

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- The Heidelberg Rhein-Neckar Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People observed the 100th anniversary of the NAACP with an evening of celebration, remembrance and reflection at the Hotel Zagreb in Schwetzingen, Germany, Nov. 7.

Throughout the evening, many program participants cited events from the 100 years of NAACP history -- a history that has seen the organization fighting for civil rights, against lynching, for commissioning African Americans as officers, for integration of the military, schools and government, and for voting rights.

Inspiring poems related to the evening's theme of "Bold Dreams - Big Victories" were recited by

presenters who brought the boldness of youth and the experience of age to their renditions.

LaKeidra Chavis, a junior at Kaiserslautern High School who is studying to be a writer, recited her original poem that touched on many phases of the history of African-Americans. Chavis said her poems have given her a way to connect with the world and that she was "...not looking to impress anyone; I just want people to know that they are not alone."

Retired teacher Clarice Jones, 83, brought in another perspective when she gave a spirited interpretation of the Maya Angelou poem, "Still I Rise." Jones, who taught in elementary schools in Texas and California for more than 45 years and was a professional dancer and dance specialist for 20 years before becoming a teacher, said she chose the poem because "it is so inspirational for young people."

Joseph Moore, a longtime member of the NAACP, told the story of how the Rhein-Neckar Branch has served the military and civilian communities since the mid-1980s. He said the branch



COURTESY RHEIN-NECKAR BRANCH NAACP

Maj. Gen. Byron S. Bagby, U.S. Army Europe chief of staff (center), poses for a photo with LaKeidra Chavis (left), a junior at Kaiserslautern High School, and retired teacher Clarice Jones at the Heidelberg Rhein-Neckar Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's the 100th anniversary observance of the NAACP, Nov. 7. The three shared experiences and poems at the event at the Hotel Zagreb in Schwetzingen, Germany.

initiated programs on awareness, cultural history, youth mentoring, reading, voter registration, and the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. International Commemoration Program.

Julia George, a teacher at Mannheim Middle School, presented Rhoza Walker's poem, "I Am a Black American." George, who teaches family consumer science, speech and drama, has her students participate in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. programs and black history programs in the Mannheim community.

Drawing on the "Bold Dreams - Big Victories" theme for the centennial celebration, guest speaker Maj. Gen. Byron S. Bagby, U.S. Army Europe chief of staff, reached into his personal background to relate how the fight for civil rights by the NAACP had affected him and his family.

He recalled that elementary schools in his hometown were only desegregated when he was in the sixth grade in 1967. Earlier his parents had only finished the 10th grade because their county had no black high school.

Bagby also told the audience of some of his eye-opening experiences during his military career. In 1999 he met two of the famous "Little Rock Nine" - the first black students to enter Little Rock High School in 1957. They were subject to hatred, violence and humiliation as they entered the school. He recalled that even 40 years after the hardship of standing up for their rights, he could still see in their faces the pain the experience had caused them.

Another meeting in 1998, this time with some of the first black military airmen, the Tuskegee Airmen, who had been arrested 43 years earlier for entering a white-only officers' club, made him aware of the pioneering actions that led to the abolishment of segregation in the armed forces.

Bagby ended by noting that now the U.S. Army is a great Army because it "... leverages and draws strength from the rich diversity within our ranks ... not just from being ethnically diverse ... but from having diverse skill sets, experiences, backgrounds and perspectives."



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