

Nationally known Pan-African Conference had humble roots

30 years strong

Today it's nationally renowned, but the 30th annual Pan-African Student Leadership Conference had humble beginnings.

By Robb Murray, Free Press staff writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 2/22/2006]

Photo by John Cross



Adrienne Hurd-Tanner (left) and Lutén Tanner will be performing at this year's Pan African conference at Minnesota State University. This year marks the 30th for the conference.

MANKATO — It began 30 years ago with a big idea, \$300 and some soup.

Those were the humble beginnings — and budget — of the first Pan-African Conference at Minnesota State University. Today, the event is known around the nation. It is a recruiting tool for the university, and one of its biggest annual events.

Hundreds of well-known scholars, experts and newsmakers have come through MSU for the conference — people such as Black Panther founder Bobby Seale and member Stokely Carmichael — who have made the event memorable. Each year, about 1,000 people attend.

"I look back at the day and don't know how we got by with that," said Michael Fagin, MSU's dean of institutional diversity, and the driving force behind the conference's creation back in the day, and the man who has kept it going.

This year's theme is "The Future of Pan Africanism: Political, Social and Spiritual Responsibilities." Among the featured speakers are: Aize Olohigbe Imouokhome Obayah, vice chancellor and professor of human development at Covenant University in Nigeria; Akwasi Adarkwah, pro-vice chancellor, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology; Eddie Moore Jr., director of diversity at The Bush School in Seattle; and Robert Jones, senior vice president, University of Minnesota.

The Pan-African Conference was the brainchild of Fagin, who on trips to Africa with students realized many of them lacked real knowledge of their heritage.

"Actually seeing the students that went on that study experience, when they gained an understanding of their roots, of the contributions of Africa," he says, "I had students with tears in their eyes."

So he decided to hold a one-time-only conference in Mankato that would attract a campus and perhaps regional audience.

"It was not my intent to make this an annual event," he says.

But after the first one — done on a shoestring \$300 budget and with student helpers cooking soup for attendees — one of Fagin's mentors, Macalaster College professor Mahmoud El-Kati, urged Fagin to keep it going. At the time, it was one of the only such conferences in the nation.

And the time was right for such an event, Fagin says. "We had unrest on campus, students protesting — it was a very right time for such a conference," Fagin says, "and people had a burning desire to look at who they were."

Since then, the conference has brought big names to campus. Carmichael, famous leader of the Black Power movement and member of the Black Panther Party, came in the 1970s. So did Black Panther Party founder Bobby Seale.

"I remember him saying to me, 'Mike, everything has changed, but nothing has changed,'" Fagin says. "I quite often quote him on that."

Larone Bennett, author of "Before the Mayflower," has been here. As has race relations expert Alvin Poussaint, women's rights activist Flo Kennedy and Malauna Karenga, the creator of Kwanzaa.

Obie Kipper was there when the first Pan-African conference was held. He was a student then. And through his undergraduate years, graduate school years and every year since then, he's been a part of it.

"Oh, it's a wonderful conference," says Kipper, who was MSU Alum of the year for 2000. "It's an educational conference that exposes youth to the college campus and what colleges have to offer."

Kipper says there isn't one particular conference that stands out for him as being the best. For him, just being part of the conference's evolution has been the most rewarding.

He came to Mankato because he was recruited for the track and field team.

"The first thing I saw when I came down here was 'Here we hung 38 Indians,'" Kipper says, referring to the sign that used to be perched near the site of the infamous mass execution of the Dakota in 1862. But he says he never regretted a day of his time in Mankato, and he was able to watch the university and the community grow in its acceptance of diversity. The conference, he said, had a lot to do with that.

"It's not only a conference to showcase African Americans," Kipper says, "but it showcases the city of Mankato in a national event."

During the 1990s, a young black man from north Minneapolis came to Minnesota State University, and he did so largely because of his years coming to the Pan-African conference with a Minneapolis youth group.

Kris Hammas went on to become the student body president and, even after he graduated, kept in contact with Fagin and still attended conferences.

There are many stories like that, Fagin says, stories of students who got their first glimpse of campus as a high school student attending a conference. It's a recruiting tool, he says, one that shows students MSU's commitment to diversity.

MSU President Richard Davenport made diversity the top priority in his strategic plan for the university, and Fagin says events such as Pan African, or the upcoming Chicano-Latino conference, show the students and the community that MSU is committed to that goal.

Dignitaries in African nations are familiar with the conference, Fagin says, which allows them to easily book guests such as Aize Olohigbe Imouokhome Obayah or Akwasi Adarkwah. The conference is known around the world, and respected close to home, he says.

"It's part of the fabric of the institution."