

# Atomic City Sportsmen Club celebrates 40 years!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on December 15, 2009)

Oak Ridge's history is like a tightly woven tapestry in a richly colored fabric with each color representing unique historical elements. As *Historically Speaking* continues to draw upon this uniqueness and as readers continue to contact me with stories, I am truly becoming more and more in awe of our rich history.

On a Thursday afternoon recently I had another of those great experiences whereby I entered a world that has been something I have known about but never quite experienced personally. Have you ever heard of the *Atomic City Sportsmen Club*? What do you think this particular club does? Do you wonder if it is some sort of sports related group? Well, it is not, it is far more important to our community.

I'll bet many of you have heard of this club and I dare say many of you know exactly who are members and what they do. You may even know of someone who has benefited from the generosity of this unique club. You may also know that the Atomic City Sportsmen Club celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year!

The club began when a group of African Americans formed an association in a most unusual and uncomfortable setting and in an equally unusual manner. This club may well have been the only one of its kind as the circumstances that led to its formation were unique to Oak Ridge.

First let me express my appreciation for Larry Gipson. Larry has again opened doors for me that I could not have entered and has introduced me to individuals who would never have known of me. He is my friend.

These men who sat around a small room in the *Atomic City Sportsmen Club's* current location on Jefferson Circle shared openly with me how their club came to be formed. The simple need for companionship primarily drove the formation of this most unusual organization.

In the beginning the organization being featured in this *Historically Speaking* column was founded by African American men who came to Oak Ridge in the wake of the Affirmative Action efforts of the major employers in 1969. Now this organization like others in Oak Ridge is diverse in its membership. However, the founders remember well the feeling of isolation they felt when they first arrived in Oak Ridge.

Do you remember that time in the late 1960's? Do you remember the hiring goals for minorities? In the rush to fill the demand, black professionals came here from all over the nation with the offer of good paying jobs.

It is sad to note that their employers would not even consider that they might like to know where other African Americans were living. But the times were such that the hiring officials were doing what they thought was required to have a more diverse and integrated workplace. I am afraid they did not give a lot of thought to the ramifications of bringing these young professionals to a new environment without any help to find associations with people they would feel more comfortable and accepted.

Many were just placed in the James H. Moore apartments without any thought on the company's part of how that would impact them. There were few blacks around them to associate with and only infrequently did they find companionship with co-workers after work hours. They were isolated and lonely. Their circumstances made it hard to associate with others of the same cultural background.

This unique club began simply enough during the summer of 1969. It started informally as the *Oak Ridge Sportsmen Club*, but soon changed the name to the *Atomic City Sportsmen Club* to avoid confusion with an existing club with a similar name. The men I spoke with were proud of the club's accomplishments over the years and are very excited about celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization this year.

If you are unaware of the organization, I am sure you are thinking "sportsmen club" must mean they are a group who do something with sports, right? Well, I wondered about that too. They just smiled when I

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asked about it and patiently explained to me what the primary function of the organization has been over these 40 years.

The original founders of the club were Quinton Long of Virginia, Wil Minter of Tennessee, John Mayo of Washington, D.C., Jim Barnes of North Carolina, Horace Miller of South Carolina, John Purnell of Maryland and Chalmers Wilson of Florida. Joe Grey, from Alabama, joined later in 1970. Quinton Long was the first president. They joined together out of a need for camaraderie in a new environment.

One of the first activities planned and executed by the club was a Valentine's Day Dance on February 14, 1970, at the Holiday Inn on Illinois Avenue where the Outback restaurant is now located. This event was so successful that the organization explored ways to utilize funds from the activity to support the disadvantaged in the community.

That first dance most assuredly must have given them a tremendous boost in their self confidence. They saw that a large segment of the population was interested in events that led to helping charitable organizations. They have continued to rely on this singular principle successfully over the ensuing years.

Their success in planning and executing fund raisers which supported charitable actions led to club to formally organize with the proper credentials and legal standing so they could accept the proceeds. The club formalized and remains a non-profit 501c3 organization focused on charitable activities with emphasis on underprivileged youth.

So you see, the *Atomic City Sportsmen Club, Inc.* is not really a "sportsmen's club" as someone might think. Rather the association formed by some young African American men seeking companionship and just someone to talk to who understood what they were going through, quickly turned to much more focused efforts to help others, not just themselves.

It may well have been this singular drive to do something of value for others, especially youth, that most helped these men survive the ordeal of being placed in a community where they had to find a way to fit in. The true and sincere desire to do charitable work just might have given them needed purpose to succeed in spite of all they had to endure.

The *Atomic City Sportsmen Club* has been a major source of activities, funds, and organizational talent for the local community ever since that auspicious beginning. The focus of the club's efforts has historically been directed toward helping underprivileged youth and remains so today. A number of community fundraisers have supported many charitable activities.

In the continuation to this article many of the community fundraisers will be noted. You can learn more about this uniquely Oak Ridge organization at their web site: <http://www.discoveret.org/acsc/>

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Some of the past and present leadership of the Atomic City Sportsmen Club, Inc., include from left to right, Jimmy Robertson, Larry Gipson, Chris Hammonds (current president), Jim Barnes, Jim Ware, Martin Perrote, and Al Guidry – regardless of the role assigned, these men are active leaders in our community



A lifetime membership in the Atomic City Sportsmen Club, Inc. is presented to Nelson Stephens by Al Guidry