

# Fighting for Freedom on the Courts



Celebration of the African-American Lawyer The Road to Brown v. Board of Education



By Sean Yoes  
AFRO Staff Writer

Many of Baltimore's Black and White amateur athletes battled to play together back in the 1940's in a city and a country that was determined to legally keep them separate.

It was early in the morning on July 11, 1948, and 18-year-old Mitzi Freishtat, a young, White tennis enthusiast was wired.

"I was very nervous. I got the permit in the morning around 8 or 9 a.m. and I was like a jumping jack, running all over the place," she said almost 56 years later, excitement still in her voice.

"But once we got to the park, I lost my nervousness. It was a mission. I knew what I was doing and we knew we were right," she recalled with conviction.

The events that continue to stir emotion in the heart of the woman who is now Mitzi Swan surround the fabled clay courts that existed for decades near Auchentoroly Terrace at venerable Druid Hill Park.

Legend has it that the late, great Arthur Ashe once played there as a teen amateur, but on that July 11, the courts were not the site of an athletic competition, but a political protest.

"The Young Progressives of Maryland are planning a tennis outing at Druid Hill Park on Sunday, July 11. As you probably know, membership in the Young Progressives is open to all regardless of race, color or creed. We have been advised by legal opinion that there is no law providing for segregation on the tennis courts.

Our members are desirous of playing tennis on the basis of ability and not on the basis of color. It is in the

Larry S. Gibson, Special Contributing Editor

Larry S. Gibson is professor of law at the University of Maryland and a historian. For the last 23 years, he has been documenting the history and contributions of Maryland's African-American lawyers. "My research began right here at the AFRO in 1981," says Gibson. He has made that research available for the creation of the Signature Series.

"YOUNG PROGRESSIVES OF MD.

"328 N. Charles St.

Pl 2470

Baltimore 1, Md.

July 3, 1948

"Mr. Harold S. Callowhill

Superintendent, Bureau of Recreation

1129 N. Calvert Street

Baltimore, Maryland

Dear Mr. Callowhill:

"The Young Progressives of Maryland are planning a tennis outing at Druid Hill Park on Sunday, July 11. As you probably know, membership in the Young Progressives is open to all regardless of race, color or creed. We have been advised by legal opinion that there is no law providing for segregation on the tennis courts.

"Our members are desirous of playing tennis on the basis of ability and not on the basis of color. It is in the best tradition of Maryland fair play that athletics be based solely upon the consideration of sportsmanship and ability.

"In order to avoid any last minute misunderstanding, we request that you notify the court attendants to permit our members on the courts in mixed groups.

"We would appreciate an immediate reply.

"Sincerely,

(sgd.) Stan Askin,

Director"

whole crowd erupted. They were singing 'America, My Country 'Tis of Thee' and the Negro National Anthem. It was very stirring," said Swan.

In all, 22 people, Black and White, were arrested and charged with rioting, conspiracy to riot or disturbing the public peace. Seven demonstrators were convicted of those charges. However, their actions were more far reaching than a simple act of civil disobedience.

"This case demonstrated that Jim Crow laws restricted the freedom of all citizens, Black and White," said Larry S. Gibson, professor of law at the University of Maryland.

"It was the first case in Maryland when Blacks and Whites together initiated a lawsuit alleging that both groups' rights were being violated by Jim Crow laws," said Gibson.

Indeed, other groups joined the Young Progressives to challenge the rule of law, which was segregation on Baltimore's recreational courts and courses.

"WE HAD A VERY GOOD TEAM."

In 1948, James Crockett was a 23-year-old African-American

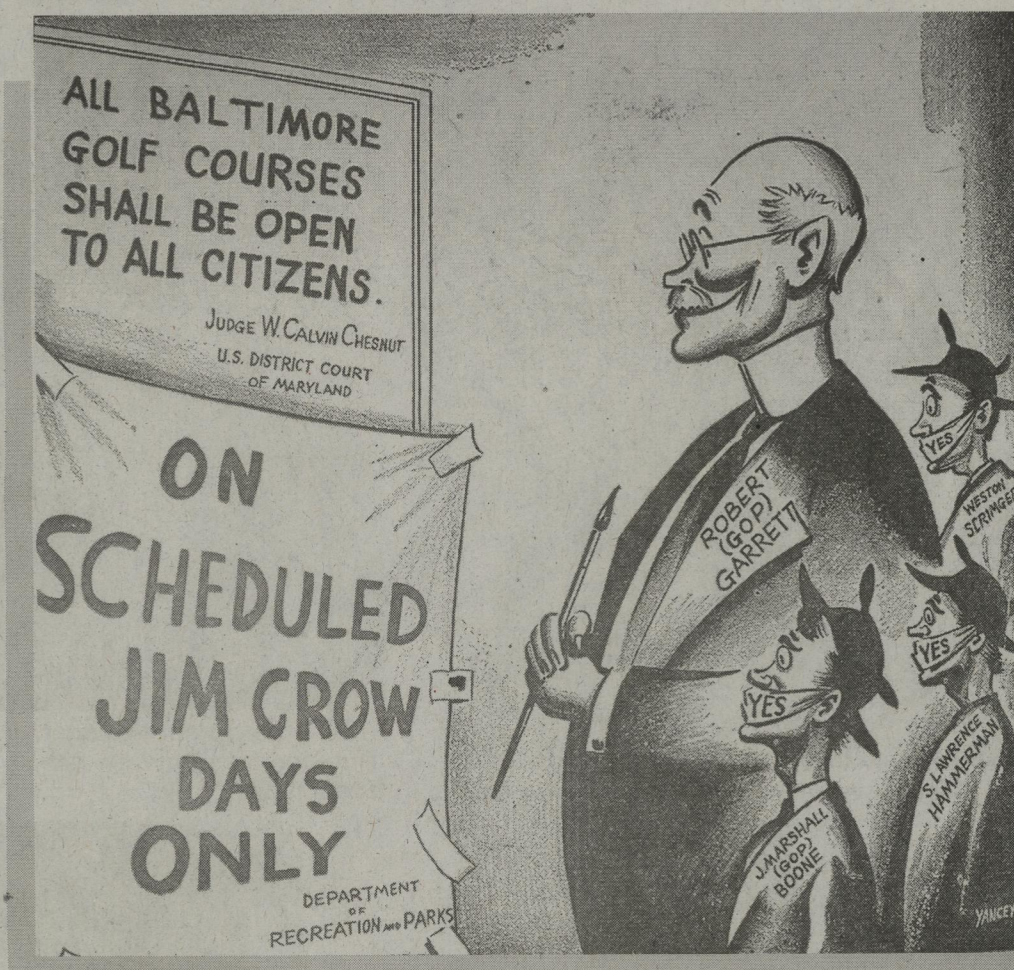
co-manager and co-owner — along with Phillip Boyer — of "The Easterwood Professionals," an interracial basketball team in Baltimore. Having a team with Blacks and Whites in the 1940s presented sig-

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As reported in the 1948 AFRO

The Baltimore Afro-American, July 24, 1948

REWRITE MEN — DIXIE STYLE



best tradition of Maryland fair play that athletics be based solely upon the consideration of sportsmanship and ability," wrote Stan Askin, director of the Young Progressives of Maryland on July 3, 1948, to Harold Callowhill, superintendent of the Bureau of Recreation and Parks.

Five days later, Askin received the response he was looking for.

"I regret that I cannot comply with your request because the Board of Recreation and Parks rules that there shall be segrega-

tion. Until such time as that rule is rescinded, I shall have to abide by it," wrote Charles Hook, superintendent of parks.

So, the stage was set for the confrontation that the Young Progressives - the younger component of the Progressive Party, a far-left political organization with alleged communist ties - were looking for.

"We told everyone what we were doing, the police, the newspapers... It was a planned demonstration," said Swan. In fact, the Young Progressives sent out a flyer

containing what some would call inflammatory language.

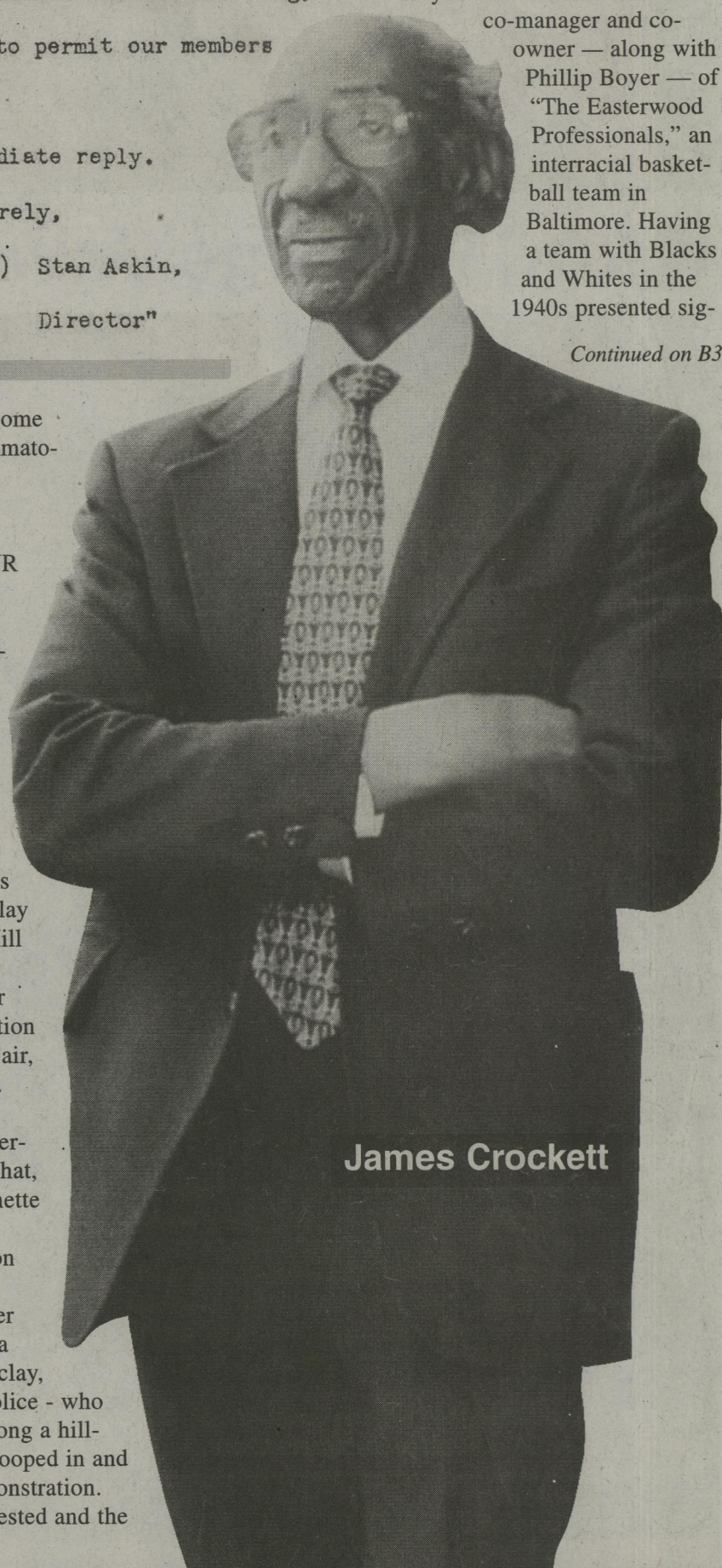
"KILL JIM CROW!" "DEMAND YOUR RIGHTS!"

"Organize to smash discrimination in recreational facilities," read the flyer's top three lines.

The organization's efforts worked. Hundreds came out to the clay courts at Druid Hill Park on that sparkling summer Sunday. Anticipation was heavy in the air, like the humidity.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon, Mitzi Freishtat, Mary Coffee, Jeanette Fino and Gloria Stewart lined up on one court. Others lined up on another court. But before a ball could hit the clay, Baltimore park police - who were staggered along a hillside, waiting - swooped in and broke up the demonstration.

"We all got arrested and the



James Crockett