



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Leroy Comrie

## Southeast Queens Community Heroes

LEROY COMRIE February 21, 2018

| ISSUE: **LOCAL HERITAGE, COMMUNITY, QUEENS**



The Southeast Queens Heroes project is a collection of biographies written and curated by the high school and college interns who volunteer in my district office. From musicians and athletes, to academics and activists, Southeast Queens has been home to countless remarkable individuals throughout our city's history. Some of these stories may be better known than others, but it is my hope that each can help inspire us all to reach a little higher and go a little farther in our own endeavors.

Don't forget to check again for new additions!

Roy Wilkins is known for his legacy of fighting for civil rights and justice. As a grandson of a slave, Roy Wilkins grew up in the height of racial tension in America. Wilkins was very passionate about helping the African American population gain their God-given rights. In spite of all the discrimination and prejudice he had to face, Wilkins graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in sociology and journalism. He believed in the American court system, and thought that African American people could slowly, but surely advance the civil rights movement through it. Using his degree, he became the editor for the St. Paul Appeal newspaper—a paper owned and run by African Americans who were unafraid to speak up about the horrible conditions they suffered under Jim Crow. He later had the opportunity to join the NAACP staff, where he took over editing *The Crisis* from W.E.B. DuBois. He quickly rose through the ranks and became President Walter White's secretary. In that position, he learned several strategies to empower African Americans, including visiting worksites to make sure that conditions were acceptable for African American workers.

After Walter White moved on from his presidential position, Wilkins became the head of the NAACP. With this position, his mission of acquiring equal rights for all African Americans transformed his passions into responsibilities. Wilkins sought to gain equality through the legal system and by exercising rights like freedom of the press and the freedom to peacefully protest. One of the most famous protests he helped organize was the March on Washington, during which more than 200,000 people peacefully assembled by the Lincoln Memorial. This, of course, was where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Wilkins was always staunchly opposed to violence in the Civil Rights Movement. Later in his

career, he went on to spearhead other efforts that could not only help his constituency, but also anyone else who experienced unjust discrimination. One such initiative was International Conference on Human Rights of 1968. This conference, hosted in Iran, was the first global conference to focus solely on human rights. Due to health complications, Wilkins had to step down from his position at the NAACP. Roy Wilkins never lost sight of what he and countless others were fighting for, which is why his great legacy will never be forgotten. Commissioner Kenneth Drew was a great leader of his time, and he was given several powerful positions throughout his life, the most famous of which was commissioner of New York City Commission on Human Rights. He was appointed this position by former Mayor John Lindsay.

As commissioner, Drew was able to make significant strides in his position— helping to make New York City safer and more equitable. The Human Rights Commission was created to protect individuals from acts of discrimination, regardless of whether that discrimination was based on skin color, religion, sexual orientation, or disability. The Commission is charged with protecting all New Yorkers in areas such as, but not limited to, education, housing, and employment.

When former New York Mayor Lindsay appointed Drew for this responsibility, he and his administration worked to make the Commission on Human Rights stronger. They amended local laws so that the commission could gain more power in investigation, enforcement, and prosecution. As a result, the Human Rights Law evolved, covering more situations for more potential victims of discrimination.

Besides being the commissioner of New York City Human Rights, Drew was also a member of One Hundred Black Men, which is an organization that strived to use the closeness of the

African American community to address the inequality occurring across the economic, political, and educational spectrums. Its mission was to empower African American communities to rise above the prejudice of the time. One Hundred Black Men represented small African American businesses whose owners could not effectively represent themselves, served the youth of their community educationally, and tried to be a loud and strong voice for those that were drowned out by racism and prejudice. Commissioner Kenneth Drew always tried his best to stand for what was right, and he worked effectively to change the lives of those who could not do it on their own.

Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis was a jazz saxophonist who played his distinctive rough-toned tenor. Davis, generally referred to as “Jaws” back in the day, was a thorough master of his instrument and his art. Known for his sincere, fluent, and no-nonsense persona, Davis played alongside with some of the greats of the time, such as Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald. Davis made his fame at Clark Monroe's Uptown House located in Harlem in the 1940s. He was a soloist with several bands of the era, playing with Lucky Millinder, Cootie Williams, Andy Kirk, and even Louis Armstrong. Davis started leading his own band in 1946, making R&B hits. He later became part of Count Basie's band in 1952, where he stayed for more than a year.

Many sources offer different explanations of how Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis earned his nickname. Some claim he received the nickname at an early recording session while creating titles for his compositions. “Lockjaw” consequently became not only the name of a song, but also a lifelong nickname. Others point to Davis's habit of clamping down on his tenor saxophone with his mouth as the reason his nickname came about, leading observers to call him “Lockjaw.”

After temporarily withdrawing from active music in 1963 to work as a booking agent, he

returned as a soloist and road manager for the Count Basie band in 1964. He played in Europe with Basie, and participated in European tours as part of the Norman Granz troupe with Ella Fitzgerald. Davis was also a noted Queens resident, living in historic Addisliegh Park on Foch Boulevard near 171st Street.

Davis continued to record in the following years, releasing *Straight Ahead* in 1976 with the Tommy Flanagan trio, and *Montreux '77* the following year. Both albums earned critical praise. Toward the end of his career, Davis often worked with trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison. Touring for months at a time in addition to recording, the pair would pick up local sidemen to complete their group.

Davis kept busy with music until the time of his death. He succumbed to cancer on November 3, 1986, passing away in a Culver City, California hospital. Davis was survived by his wife, Beatrice, and a daughter, and left his fans a world-famous discography that has stood the test of time.

William "Bill" Briggs was a competitive tennis player and coach and the founder of the National Academy of Junior Tennis and Youth Development. An avid sports enthusiast, Briggs enjoyed playing numerous sports as a child; however, he only became interested in tennis out of curiosity. Quickly, the sport changed Bill's life for the better, becoming a passion rather than a hobby. Brigg's passion for tennis turned into a legendary career that spanned the course of several decades and influenced numerous young people to enjoy the game of tennis.

Having played tennis as an amateur for several years, Bill Briggs decided to become a competitive player. He began to compete in numerous tennis championships in New Jersey and Connecticut, and he eventually won the Masters event in his home state of New York.

Brigg's newfound success in tennis helped him to realize that he could help others, just as tennis had helped him. Inspired by the late tennis great Arthur Ashe, Bill founded the National Academy of Junior Tennis and Youth Development, Youth and Tennis, Inc. in 1972. The tennis program had humble beginning. Briggs had only five students, and he was using his own money to purchase tennis racquets and cover other expenses. Yet, the success of the program and the recognition it was receiving helped attract over 30,000 kids and young men and women since its inception. Briggs believed in the power of mentoring and inspiring young people, and he wanted tennis to motivate others as well.

In addition to receiving numerous tennis awards, Briggs received several community awards, including the York College Leadership Award, the NAACP Community Service Award, and the Martin Luther King Leadership Award. Briggs was inducted into the New England Tennis Association Hall of Fame for his thirty years of service, and he received the Sports Award from Queens Borough President Melinda Katz, in celebration of Black History Month. With the success of Youth and Tennis, Briggs founded a permanent tennis facility at Roy Wilkins Southern Queens Park. There, he created the "School for Academic and Social Development," a program designed to inform young people about resume writing, healthy eating habits, fire safety, and numerous other topics. In 2010, an indoor facility at Roy Wilkins Park was built in order for tennis to be available all year round. This spurred the creation of a program called "Early Exposure to Tennis." Through his tireless efforts, Briggs was able to make his academy successful, and his dream come alive in the lives of countless young people.

Bill Briggs dedicated his life to serving the young people of Southeast Queens. He passed away on April 30, 2017 at the age of 72, leaving behind a thriving youth tennis program and a legacy of community dedication.