

**Name of Interviewee: Keith Ali**

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**Additional Materials: TV34 interview**

**Interviewer: Terry Edgewater**

**Date: 03/23/2018**

**Location: Montclair Fire Department on 1 Pine St, Montclair, NJ.**

**Log:**

Mr. Keith Ali was born in 1955 and grew up in Montclair's South End, recalling "open doors with dogs running around...everybody knew one another." As a child he was not immediately aware of the racism impacting the town, which he would come to understand as he grew up. He talks of his childhood schooling and recreational activity, including involvement as a drummer with the Soul Stompers. He notes the impact that news coverage of current events involving treatment of Blacks in the United States--and even cartoons depicting Black characters--had on him as a young child, creating fear and unease, and how the strength and stability of the church and local community countered that.

The interview shares details on his exposure to and involvement with powerful cultural and political figures at the local, regional and global level – from his own grandfather to Reverend Buster Soaries to boxer Muhammad Ali and many others. He shares his deep involvement and commitment to Black empowerment and political initiatives.

From a very young age, Keith Ali's work ethic was impressive as he worked in many capacities at the same time, from security positions to owning the Sterington House in Montclair, to corrections – including a 34-year career with the Essex County Corrections Department.

**Timestamps:**

[0:00] Keith Ali was born on December 7, 1955 and grew up on Grenada Place in the South End of Montclair. His parents ultimately bought his grandfather's home on that street. He has a twin brother and an older brother. He recalls a neighborhood of "open doors...everyone knew one another" that the neighborhood was "somewhat" diverse, but not as it is now. He also contrasts it with other parts of Montclair, referring to an "unspoken gentlemen's agreement" between realtors and power brokers at the time to not sell homes to African Americans, Hispanics and others, in Upper Montclair. As a child, he was not aware of the redlining that was in place, as he is now aware.

[2:56]: In regards to childhood activities, he states "you did EVERYthing" and were most often outside – he cites Nishaune, Canterbury and Glenfield Parks where the township staffed recreational activities and staff. He states how, "your mother placed you outside and you explored, whether in the woods, parks, local basketballs courts, tetherball, dodgeball, horseshoes, you had someone and somewhere to play. There was no such thing as sitting in the house all day, compared to what children do in today's age with the advancement of technology." When asked about the school systems, he mentioned how they were racially divided. In 1960 there was a huge protest at Glenfield School. He cites the involvement of his grandfather, Richard Owens (who lived to age 106!), and Maynard Catchings, and references the Catchings Owens Suite [at Glenfield School] that was named in honor of their accomplishments. Maynard Catchings was a

successful businessman, leader, and organizer in the Montclair community, NAACP, and other organizations. Keith Ali described his grandfather as “a great orator...having a silver tongue with explaining things...to draw a picture with his words.”

[3:25] Keith Ali’s grandfather Richard Owens, Maynard Catchings, and other active community members including Wally Choice helped a group of thirteen to fourteen mothers that began a protest at Glenfield School and ultimately shut the school down. They brought awareness to inferior conditions shared by several schools: Glenfield School was dilapidated, and the Montclair Board of Education was not providing sufficient funds. He notes issues still exist in public school systems today: tracking that reduces opportunities for African American students in honors classes. Keith Ali explains that he attended school through grade 12, and it was rough for him. He explains that a speech impediment made him less inclined to books and learning and that his twin brother progressed more quickly than he did. Keith Ali was “tracked” and kept in “Group 3.”

He notes that Councilwoman and community leader Renee Baskerville of Montclair is also a twin and both sets of twins were in school together in Montclair.

[7:15] Bussing started in Montclair when Keith Ali was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He says for him, *and emphasizes that this was HIS experience, not everyone’s*...when students were bussed from Edgemont to his school, those students were much more prepared than he was. He became an even quieter, reserved student.

At about the same time, he recounts his experiences of coming home and turning on the television channels, watching African Americans get chased, bitten by dogs, and fire tanks being turned on them, in Atlanta, Georgia, noting that no one was paying considering the type of fear-factor that impacted Black children his age. He then mentions the racist cartoons (Heckyl and Jeckyll, Sambo) that depicted “Black folks catching hell, as the butt of jokes.” While these cartoons were recognized by psychological professionals as violent, they were never cited for their racism. He notes the fear these news and cartoon images instilled in children. He remembers the day President Kennedy was assassinated; students were sent home from Nishuane School. That same week, he recounts that they’d also had war-preparation air raid “duck and cover” drills practiced in classrooms. He remembers the concern on his parents’ faces at the time; children were impacted by it as well. An important aspect, in all the chaos that occurred, was church. Religion played a strong part in Keith Ali’s family and others in the community. Church was well-attended; the kids all went to Bible class; sang in the choir. The whole community of parents, kids, police officers, doctors (he recalls Dr. Rice) was involved in the church and had eyes on the youngsters and provided stability for them during uncertain times in the country. Keith Ali cites his interest in actor John Wayne and the strong, western roles he played. He notes that while he was more inclined to John Wayne’s tough individual approach to troubles (joking that Wayne didn’t take the “sign ‘We Shall Overcome’ approach) his mother persisted in her insistence that he consider an approach more in keeping with that song, although he never became resigned to it.

[11:32] Keith Ali begins to discuss his interest in boxer Muhammad Ali (known still as Cassius Clay at that time). “He’s [Muhammad Ali] talking like Clark Gable, like John Wayne...like a man who is going to confront his issues, and he attracted me almost immediately.” Ten years later he met him and started to work for him.

[11:57]: When asked about his experiences about working with the professional boxer, Muhammad Ali, he described it as a “beautiful experience” and fondly shared an abundance of interesting facts and information.

***NOTE: Through a portion of the interview, Keith Ali notes an influential figure that he refers to by a combination of several different names: Ronald Debnam Hatari (sp?) Sallahudin***

Keith Ali first met Muhammad Ali through a Montclair neighbor named Ron Debnam [also referred to, as noted above, as Hatari, Ron Sallahudin, Ron Hatari Sallahudin] who was a college student involved in the Black Power Movement. Debnam/Hatari started the first chartered Black Student Union in the country, along with Reverend Buster Soaries -- in effort to define themselves as opposed to being defined by others. It was 1967 and they were known for wearing dashiki style clothing.

Keith Ali mentions his attraction to this neighbor began during middle school years, before Keith Ali was aware of Black Student Union activities--when the man was known as Hatari – he had the fastest car in the neighborhood and was skilled in karate. Some of the same qualities that attracted Keith Ali to Muhammad Ali attracted him to Hatari.

In high school, Keith Ali became involved in activities organized by Reverend Buster Soaries. (Rev. Soaries ultimately became involved in the New Jersey Issues Convention, which became the New Jersey Black Issues Convention, and then moved on to Chicago and joined Operation PUSH with Reverend Jesse Jackson.)

Hatari went on to Hampton University and became involved in Black Community Defense, later known as Black Community Development. These groups were politically active, helping the first of several Black mayors get elected: Ken Gibson in Newark; Coleman in Cleveland, Ohio; and Mayor Hart in East Orange.

[14:27] Keith Ali notes that straight out of high school, he became politically active, working with Hatari on political campaigns, for the Black mayors of Newark and East Orange. He was only 19 years old when he found himself as a [Democratic] County Committee person, where he met Muhammad Ali, while doing security for a political rally that Muhammad Ali attended for [wrongfully imprisoned and convicted] boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter (later portrayed by Denzel Washington in a movie about Rubin “Hurricane” Carter.)

[14:58] Keith Ali notes that by this time he had joined the Nation of Islam with Hatari. He then elaborates on how he had always been a disciplined individual, but fondly recalls Muhammad Ali’s sense of humor, trying to joke while Keith Ali and his brother while they were working security. Muhammad Ali gave Keith and his twin brother the names Heckyl and Jeckyll.

Keith Ali recounts meeting boxing promoter Murad Muhammad, who had been one of Muhammad Ali’s first security men. Appreciating the discipline that Keith Ali and his brother displayed at a young age of 19-20, despite Muhammad Ali’s playful teasing, the brothers came to work for Muhammad Ali.

[16:23]: Keith Ali then details his experiences with The Sterington House, a catering facility [working to a great extent for the African American community; on 290 Bloomfield Avenue across from Lackawanna Station – today’s Greek Taverna Restaurant, originally built as a livery stable in the 1800s]. The Sterington House held Boy Scout meetings, NAACP dinners, and

awards for football, in addition to their long history of famous singers and bands, including from the 1930s to 1940s, performers such as Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, big bands and local bands like The Duke of Earls. The Sterington House owner had been duped out of money by his business partner, which resulted in the hall losing its liquor license. With Debnam/Hatari/Sallahudin, Keith Ali took over Sterington House, opening an after-hours alcohol-free nightclub. It was the first club that operated from 8 pm to around 5 am, incorporating chicken and waffles breakfasts like some Harlem clubs did. Keith Ali was just 19 years old and it was sometimes a difficult position to be in – he was younger than the patrons at the club who were required to be 21 (women) or 24 (men).

He notes hiring then police officer Roger Terry to do security at the door [Mr. Terry, a well-known African American leader in Montclair, went on to become Deputy Police Chief and a Montclair Councilman and Deputy Mayor.]

The Sterington Club was Keith Ali's income, simultaneous with the times he was working with Muhammad Ali. Some of the groups he notes performing include Sister Sledge, The Delfonics, Keith Ali and other owners learned the business after at first being naïve and getting taken advantage of by music booking agents. With Ron Salahuddin's help, they were introduced to a New York City-based music promoter, Freddie Price, who mentored them and introduced them to acts like the singer Phyllis Hyman and other groups. Keith Ali cites a "good career" promoting club acts, concerts, and then into boxing business.

[18:40] Keith Ali notes being hired by Muhammad Ali's team – Murad Muhammad and with Ron Salahuddin as his partner and their boss, gave Keith Ali and his partners the visibility to capitalize on opportunities that otherwise would have been unavailable to them.

He acknowledges that it seems hard to fathom that they could be doing all of these things at one time, but he credits assistance from others.

***Note: Keith Ali refers repeatedly to an influential community organizer and activist named Balozi. His full name is Balozi Harvey.***

[20:00] He talks about several influential, internationally political people, including a key figure called Balozi who were helpful to him that were also instrumental in the creation of Kwanzaa and other cultural and political endeavors; Balozi kept Keith Ali involved in politics; cites Ron Hatari Sallahudin who helped them in the entertainment business; Sallahudin and Murad Muhammad who connected them to the boxing business and entertainment connections. He notes they helped him keep advancing in these areas.

[21:09] Keith Ali points out to the interviewer that throughout this time, he always had a job, as early as 8<sup>th</sup> grade, including summer jobs as a parking security person at a Bloomfield New Jersey bank where his grandfather worked and other odd jobs including as a janitor at Kimberly Academy in Montclair.

His work ethic was noted by political leaders and members of the Essex County Corrections department while he was volunteering at a Democratic campaign office.

In June of 1976 he began his career as a provisional officer working for the Essex County Department of Corrections. Then he transferred to State Corrections 1978-1979--still also managing to work security for Muhammad Ali, by the way! In 1980 he returned to the jail, after

a massive riot brought national attention to the Newark jail system. In 1985, he was made an Assistant Warden, then Sargent, to Lieutenant, to Captain, to Warden, to Director of the Department of Corrections. He retired after 34 years of service with the Essex County jail system.

[25:00] Keith Ali returns to his role in the boxing business and other “progressive stuff”, which continued simultaneously with his corrections career, noting that Muhammad Ali was a big “catalyst” getting him exposure.

Keith Ali also cites local priest Father Brady, at St. Peter Claver Church, that had CYO activities – and girls! He discusses the girls’ drill team, the Soul Stompers, for which he and his older brother became drummers. He appreciated the Latin flavor of the music they performed. He notes Father Brady’s early support of Dr. [Martin Luther] King, Jr. and his closeness with Dr. King when he visited Montclair High School. Father Brady brought in a military drill instructor to teach the girls. The Soul Stompers excelled in competition, becoming national champions, and performed at such high profile events as the Jets-Miami Dolphins Super Bowl half-time show, the opening of Disneyworld in Florida, Indianapolis 500 Race (circa 1970 and again 1971), all town parades, and they were also filmed by a German film production company.

Keith Ali reiterates that despite not getting great wealth from some of these activities, they accomplished many good, progressive things, based on a strong upbringing and support in Montclair.

[28:55] Keith Ali’s relationship with Muhammad Ali and his wife continues. The experience he had working with Muhammad Ali opened doors into a career path and connections outside of the people he grew up around. Keith Ali explains how grateful he was to be able to have the privilege of working with such an incredible man, whom he looked up to in his younger years.

[29:13] Keith Ali shares that his mother was a nurse. She attended nursing school in Montclair, but she wasn’t allowed at that time to work at Mountainside Hospital due to racial discrimination. Instead, she worked at Martling Hospital in Newark, now University Hospital, as a Visiting Health Nurse in pediatrics. (In fact, he notes that plans to demolish Martling Hospital to make way for University Hospital were one of the triggers for the Newark riots/rebellion, which many don’t realize; there were concerns for the Martling employees, among other things.) Keith Ali and his brothers sometimes accompanied her on her home visits if she did not have childcare. His mother worked with Mary Singletary, a Montclair resident who was a gubernatorial-appointee and recognized leader in women’s rights; after Ms. Singletary left Martling Hospital for Planned Parenthood, she eventually recruited Keith Ali’s mother to join her there and his mom became a Director of Planned Parenthood in New Brunswick and Paterson. His mother remains active in her retirement helping others, volunteering with children with disabilities. Keith Ali’s father was a laborer for Annin Flag Company on Bloomfield Avenue [in Verona]; Keith Ali notes that even at times when he may not have been proud of what our country was doing, he was always proud of the flag knowing his father’s role. His father’s knowledge of silk screening procedures from his work at Annin Flag Company helped Keith Ali with making color posters for concert promotion. His father’s other jobs included side jobs as a janitor, and later work at Beech Nut Baby Food, Gerber Baby Food. His parents separated as Keith Ali entered high school. His father ultimately moved back to North Carolina and was deceased by the time of this interview. Keith Ali comments on his grandfather, whom

he calls, “the Rock” and notes that he worked as a “vault man” at a local bank into his 80s and even uncovered an employee stealing from the bank one time.

[34:42]: Discussion ensues of Keith Ali’s work in the Community Development Corporation (CDC) Board at East Orange. Keith Ali notes that he dealt with legends of East Orange: Bill and Steven Thomas (The Thomas Brothers), Harold Karns/Councilman, and Bernie Williams. East Orange at the time had large African American and Irish communities, which sometimes cooperated politically and other times less so. The Community Development Corporation Board locally distributed grants from funds from Washington, which were result of integration and housing efforts. He explains how the Community Development Corporation Board came after the Integration Bill in 1964, then Housing legislation, and ultimately became CDBG [Community Development Block Grants] block grants to go to these communities and help stimulate growth, help those in poverty.

Keith Ali and a slate of others – including knowledgeable, politically-connected and accomplished advocates Mary Patterson and Catherine Willis -- who had grown impatient with older, less progressive incumbents who they felt were not moving quickly enough became involved in the CDC Board, were voted into office and held those seats for 6-7 years. Keith Ali learned much about parliamentary procedures in that role, Robert’s Rules of Order.

During this time, through Keith Ali’s role as Assistant Warden at the jail, he became aware of and also joined a volunteer organization that he cites for its great contributions called, Offender Aid and Restoration (OAR). OAR volunteers performed mentoring and taught life skills and conflict resolution to the incarcerated. Through this organization, Keith Ali met well-known New Jersey civil attorney Attorney Raymond Brown, who was instrumental in bringing reform into the prison system.

[39:00]: Discussion ensued of Keith Ali’s work in the Third World Trade Institute in Harlem 1982-1996. He references introductions made by Balozzi who was the Executive Director of the Third World Trade Institute. Balozzi had been instrumental in establishing cultural and economic exchanges between the cities of East Orange and Newark with African countries and made those connections on a larger scale for Third World Trade Institute. Mr. Keith explains that he was able to squeeze his work with this organization into his incredibly busy schedule because he was able to schedule long work shifts at the jail, giving him free days other times of the week, using vacation or other time off as needed to accommodate all the other various obligations.

Keith Ali recalls that the first African President he met, in 1985, was Julius Kambarage Nyerere [the first president of the East African country of Tanzania], and Keith Ali helped set up banquet for dignitaries to convene and network. Bringing it full circle, Keith Ali was able to get Muhammad Ali involved in Third World Institute initiatives to help bring awareness to the efforts, noting that he, his brothers and others often made this type of progress and impact without the benefit of college degrees or formal education in this type of work, but instead by their tenacity, long-built networks, and being immersed in and committed to the work from an early age. Keith Ali discusses with fondness and pride many of his travels through the Third Word Trade Institute.

[48:00] When asked what about Montclair is special to him:

He cites Montclair's well-known and highly regarded racially mixed community. He notes the accomplished Black and Italian athletes from Montclair who brought fame to Montclair., including Yogi Berra. Keith Ali recounts his time during the Soul Stompers, when they were trying to raise money to attend the Indianapolis 500, and Father Brady sent the team canvassing for donations; some of the biggest donations came from [wealthy] residents along South Mountain Avenue; the fact that Father Brady was white and spoke directly to wealthy white residents to invest in the town's youth helped the effort. Keith Ali calls Montclair a "huge, huge talent of exposure."

Keith Ali remembers actor Sidney Poitier coming to Montclair high School when he was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and all the girls swooned, Dr. King came to the high school, at church services you had high profile singers – "Montclair always had that *flavor*... and the town would always come together for the high school" especially for the big games. He notes that, at the same time, the town definitely "had some issues... some of which still exist to this day with the school system."

Keith Ali wrapped up the interview by concluding how most of the Black people who settled in Montclair came here to work, or came here following successful Blacks who had come before them. He explained how Montclair was the only place where, coming out of the South, you could see the upward mobility.

Many Blacks that came to Montclair came for work in the wealthy homes on Upper Mountain and South Mountain avenues. Keith Ali's grandmother had worked as a servant in one of the large homes owned by a federal judge – Devermore --on Montclair's First Mountain "with views of the skyline of New York" and that his grandfather shoveled cinders from the coal furnaces in large homes and the Wellmont Theater, then his grandfather worked for Swenson and Swenson which traded with companies that imported fruit in the 1930s and 1940s; his grandfather also worked briefly as a pullman on the train before he began working at the bank where he remained until his 80s.