

As I See it by James H. Buford

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The year 2007 has definitely been an adventure for African Americans in St. Louis as we witnessed the good, the bad and the ugly being played out for the entire world to see. In the early spring, the Missouri State Board of Education voted to strip the St. Louis Public Schools of accreditation and institute a transitional board to run the district. Although this move was originally seen as a detriment to the black community the jury is still out on this one. Today, the SLPS transitional board is still a work in progress. Diversity-wise it shows promise with Rick Sullivan heading up the group which also includes former-school board member Richard Gaines and Melanie Adams, the former executive director for Teach for America and program coordinator for the Missouri History Museum. In 2008, we look forward to productive activities happening at SLPS.

In July, the Urban League and St. Louis were the proud hosts of the 2007 National Urban League Conference which featured visits by Democratic frontrunners Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Dennis Kucinich. For that moment in time we were truly on the world stage as National Urban League President Marc H. Morial invited all presidential candidates to respond to the Opportunity Compact, a set of policy prescriptions that builds America's urban infrastructure. More than 10,000 people attended this event which also featured visits by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Al Sharpton, Rep. Maxine Waters, Susan L. Taylor and many others. Economic empowerment was the major theme of the conference which focused on career readiness and employment opportunities for African Americans and others.

Following this high point, St. Louis had to face some of its old racist demons with the demotion and retirement of former St. Louis Fire Chief Sherman George. With nearly 40 years of firefighting experience, exemplary performances and the designation of St. Louis' first African American fire chief, George was definitely an asset to the St. Louis community. As we all know this battle still rages on today with the mayoral recall effort and economic boycott of the City of St. Louis. New chapters to this saga continue to be added almost daily as racial fires continue to erupt at City firehouses and the National Society of Black Engineers threatens to move its convention from St. Louis in 2011. In the New Year, we can only hope for reconciliation and healing between the races in the St. Louis metropolitan area following this diversity disaster.

So, St. Louis has undergone many dramatic changes this year. In 2008, it remains to be seen whether our city will rise to the occasion of embracing diversity to become a first class cosmopolitan city it was meant to be.