

Original 'Voice Of The Twin Counties' Fell Silent Six Years Ago

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CATSKILL — This is part one of three on the demise of the former local radio station WCKL.

Part One - Community Empowerment

There are likely very few people in the Catskill-Hudson area that do not remember the area's AM radio station WCKL, which went off the air only six short years ago.

However, there are probably even fewer people who know just what happened to it, and why it is no longer on the airwaves.

Athens resident Kermit Eady does, though, and the tale behind WCKL's demise, he says, is one that raises serious questions about the conduct of former Gov. Eliot Spitzer when he was serving as state attorney general.

Eady was the head of the now-defunct Black United Fund of New York (BUFNY), a Harlem-based, not-for-profit community development agency that purchased WCKL in 2002 with the intent of establishing it as a talk radio station serving Greene and Columbia counties.

Eady spearheaded that purchase.

Eady said, however, that in the months just before the station was to go on the air, Spitzer, as attorney general, created allegations against BUFNY, forced out its directors, replaced them with his own hand-picked people, and drove him and other key personnel out.

Eady said the purchase of the station was then allowed to languish by the new board, along with other, even larger, assets the organization owned, until everything — the assets and the unproven allegations — disappeared over the years.

Eady said this was during a period in time when he believes Spitzer was going after charitable organizations to make a name for himself, and that the BUFNY matter — unconcluded and without substantiation — was simply left in limbo once Spitzer had achieved his goal of adding it to his list of “so-called accomplishments.”

Eady said he still wants answers and still wants the radio station to be resurrected, and

is hopeful that the political will to help him do so, which he said has been seriously lacking in the past, is there.

Eady noted that the story of the loss of WCKL is a long and convoluted one, and that the radio station was, in effect, collateral damage from what he said was Spitzer's "unwarranted and improper takeover of the Black United Fund of New York."

Eady also said that when he founded the Black United Fund of New York in 1979 as a statewide not-for profit organization to empower the greater black community, he never imagined it would end the way it did.

He also stressed that until Spitzer's action against it in 2003, the organization was extremely successful and well respected.

Eady said that all changed after people like himself and BUFNY vice-president Larry A. Barton were forced out of office in 2003. He said the organization, including its assets, then essentially disappeared from the map.

"We started Black United Fund of New York in January 1979," Eady said. "We had more than \$100 million in assessed values when Spitzer drove us out."

"The purpose of founding the organization," he explained, "was to organize the human and financial resources of black and minority people, to help them participate in their growth, development and empowerment."

Eady said that one of the first things he did with the organization — which drew attention to it — was to change the way government employees in counties throughout the state, including New York City, could direct their automatic charity deductions from payrolls.

"Our money came through the payroll deduction process from employees who designated it to the Black United Fund," said Eady. "It was probably about \$2.5 million a year."

"I opened up (diversified) the payroll deduction market plan," said Eady. "Prior to that, it (the option for a payroll charities deduction) was only through the United Way Drive."

"It allowed municipal employees to say, 'I don't want to give my money anymore through the United Way. I want to give my money through the Black United Fund,'" Eady said. "We forced them to change the name to State Employee Federated

Appeal.”

He said the name essentially means that participating organizations can ask, or “appeal” to, municipal employees statewide for their charitable payroll deductions.

“They were then called fundraising campaigns,” he said. “It was called United Way Campaigns before that.”

Eady said the change was also effected through organizational efforts at large corporations, the first one being IBM.

“The first to open up was IBM in 1980,” he said. “We also did the same with New York State in the public sector, including the city and counties.”

“We did it through employee organizing, petitions within the company,” he said. “They would get a pledge card to designate how much and to what charity they wanted the money to go to.”

He said the pledge card would have a list of names of charitable groups that the employee could then check off.

“We listed about 20 organizations that people could designate to,” Eady said. “It was a term called federations, which means all of the organizations that you would list, that people could check off and make a donation to.”

“So we forced the municipalities to open up to campaign drives,” Eady said, “but they (the state government) said they had no time to run it. They said, „We want United Way to run it on everybody's behalf.””

“We objected,” Eady said, noting that objection included a meeting with the Commissioner of the state Office of General Services in about 1982.

“But,” he added, “we got overruled, so they allowed United Way to manage it (the overall pool of donations).”

Eady said he interpreted that as the state saying to him, “We're still going to give United Way direct financial access to the employees, but you (BUFNY) cannot have direct access to the employees.”

“So the state would send the money when it was collected to United Way of New York City,” said Eady, “and United Way of New York City was supposed to send it to us.”

“Now a fundraising drive takes place in the fall,” Eady said, “and the money starts coming out of your paycheck in January.”

“The state (OGS) then sent the money to United Ways all over the state, and each one had to send to Black United Fund of New York its share,” he said.

“But the United Way of NYC set an administration fee that they charged us,” said Eady, “which was not approved by the state.” He said the fee severely impacted BUFNY’s ability to operate.

“United Way of New York City,” said Eady, “has taken from Black United Fund (during those times) up to 40 percent of their income for administration (of BUFNY incoming donations).”

Eady said there was also difficulty in the amount of time it took to receive those funds from United Way of NYC.

“In some cases they didn't give us the money for two years,” Eady said.

He said he believes United Way of NYC saw benefit from the use of those funds, and that the delays may have been intentional because United Way of NYC resented how BUFNY successfully re-directed a portion of the statewide annual gross charitable donations away from them.

“They made interest off our money,” Eady said, “and it was to squeeze us without any money, to put us out of business.”

Eady said that although the donations process was fairly straightforward, the delays in receiving the funds created organizational choices that needed to be made.

“If employees had selected Black United Fund (as the conduit) for their donations to go to a not-for-profit, say, called Save The Children,” said Eady, “our obligation was, of course, to give those dollars to Save The Children.”

“But,” he added, “since we didn't get — a lot of times — money for two years from United Way of NYC, we couldn't give it because we didn't have it.”

Eady said one way BUFNY sought to overcome that problem was to purchase and redevelop commercial and residential real estate in Harlem and Brooklyn, and that they were very successful at it.

Eady said that part of the dilemma in operating Black United Fund was to make sure there was sufficient operating capital, and explained that the funds from employee

charitable donations should not be used for that purpose.

He said another way organizations like BUFNY could try to increase operating capital was to seek corporate matching funds for employee donations.

“Say employees at IBM give United Way \$6 million a year,” said Eady, “then IBM matches that \$6 million, and United Way could use those matching funds for administration, but not the contributions.”

He said, however, that effort was not always successful because any decision to do so was totally dependent on the will of the employing corporation, and that companies were not always supportive.

“IBM gave no matching money to Black United Fund of New York,” he said. “They would say that's their choice.”

“So I had to leverage the money we had for both programs and administration,” Eady said, adding that is how BUFNY got into purchasing and redeveloping properties.

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