

College honors women pioneers of labor

Library collection named after local woman who gave 50 years to unions

By Tawanda W. Johnson
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Inside Maida Springer-Kemp's Highland Park home hangs a black and white photograph of an older man with a slender face, graying hair and a slight smile.

Her voice rises as she talks of the fire behind that smile, and the respect she has for this man.

The feeling must have been mutual. Inscribed on the photo: "To Maida, with affection, the Chief."

Springer-Kemp, 86, is dressed casually in a long blue-jean skirt with matching jacket as she retells the story of how her late friend and mentor sparked her own 50-year career in the labor movement for which she will be honored today.

As a 7-year-old in 1917, Maida Stewart had recently emigrated with her family to New York City from Panama.

"A. Philip Randolph was a household name in New York," she said. He was a giant in the civil-rights movement whose career spanned into the 20th century. His work resulted in anti-discrimination legislation being signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Randolph is perhaps most noted for his role as leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

After starting the union in 1925, he would go on to organize the most celebrated march in American history — the 1963 March on Washington, where civil rights leader the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Known as "the Chief" by close friends, Randolph's nickname stuck because of his character and lead-

ership, Springer-Kemp said.

"He... felt people of color did not receive justice and respect."

It was his work, his efforts, that inspired Springer-Kemp to join the union movement with an eye toward helping other black American workers, especially women.

The impact of that career — and the career of other union pioneers — will be duly noted at La Roche College this afternoon with the formal opening of The Maida Springer-Kemp Collection on Women and Labor at the college's Wright Library.

"I think it's extraordinary," Springer-Kemp said of the collection. Then she added in her characteristic fashion of deflecting praise, "This isn't just for me, it's a part of the history of working people, the largest group of citizenry in this country."

Her interest in unions began in earnest at the age of 23 when she was living in New York City and had recently married Owen Springer, a staunch Republican. Their son, Eric, was born in 1929.

They were living through the horrors of the Depression, and Springer-Kemp had taken a job in a Manhattan garment factory because her husband's dental firm had cut his pay substantially.

She worked long hours in a sweat shop for almost nothing.

The injustice of those working conditions came home to her when she heard a speech by Randolph.

In 1933, she joined the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Local 22. Several years later, she was named shop steward and became one of the first blacks to work as a business agent for her union.

After Randolph sealed a contract with Pullman company for the sleeping car porters, she participated in a victory march with him in New York City in 1937.



Martha Rial/Post-Gazette

Maida Springer-Kemp — "I'm not projecting the union as the best Sunday school on the block, but it helped me a great deal."

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Randolph had worked 12 years to secure the contract for his new union.

Springer-Kemp was impressed. "I had grown up, and I became one of the foot soldiers for the movement," she said.

Her activism turned into a 50-year union career that took her to such places as Washington, D.C., Chicago, England, Africa, Indonesia, and Turkey.

In 1945, Springer-Kemp became the first black woman to represent the American Federation of Labor abroad. It was a goodwill mission offered by the U.S. Office of War Information and Exchange that took her and others to England.

Her memory of the event is bittersweet. Springer-Kemp recalled that before going to Europe she had to stop in Washington, D.C., where she was barred from staying in a local hotel because of her skin color.

Another friend and colleague helped temper her anger. Mary McLeod-Bethune was a black educator, civil rights leader and founder of Bethune-Cookman college in Florida and the National Council of Negro Women.

McLeod-Bethune told her she had to focus on her mission, Springer-Kemp recalled. "She sobered me."

Springer-Kemp had to rise to another challenge in 1946. Randolph was trying to persuade her to organize a rally in Madison Square Garden. The goal: Encourage the establishment of a permanent federal Fair Employment Practices Committee.

"The Chief called me in his office, and he said 'Maida, the cause of social justice is at stake,'" she remembered.

Springer-Kemp got busy, even enlisting her son's help.

"As a youngster, I helped my mother to hand out leaflets for various rallies," said her son, Eric W. Springer, 67, a Squirrel Hill resident and partner in the Oakland law firm Horty Springer & Matern.

The rally was a success — 25,000 attended.

Springer-Kemp's career gradually expanded to more international assignments. She became an international representative for the AFL-CIO's International Affairs Department during the late 1950s.

There, she helped organize fledgling African trade unionists and later helped start a school for them in Kenya. She also started an exchange program for Africans to study at Harvard University.

"The problem in Kenya was that workers had to pass an oral English test to get beyond minimum wage," she recalled.

Jackie Mullins, a staff worker at the United Steelworkers of America, said she considered Springer-Kemp her mentor. It is appropriate that her work is being celebrated, she said.

"She is quite a lady and has been very encouraging," she said.

Patricia Green Cotman, assistant to the president for community relations at La Roche, got the idea to start the new library collection after Springer-Kemp participated in a colloquium there last fall.

"[She] is a phenomenal woman and exemplifies what is best about our workers in this country," Cotman said.

"As I gathered this information about her, it led to more resources, and I thought, 'Why not have a collection bearing her name with her contribution to the labor movement?'"

The Aurora Reading Club of Pittsburgh, a city-based literary society founded by black women more than 100 years ago, is co-sponsoring today's event and will donate books, periodicals and other research materials for the collection. The college also purchased materials for the collection last year.

Springer-Kemp speaks glowingly of her labor movement experiences, but concedes she faced her share of obstacles.

Racism and sexism were among them.

While working as educational director at the Plastic Button and Novelty Workers union in New York during the 1940s, she dealt with white men who refused to socialize with black men and used derogatory terms to describe them.

With dinner invitations from the mothers of those white men, she won some whites over and debunked their stereotypical views of blacks.

"This was one of my life's greatest learning experiences," Springer-Kemp recalled.

er-Kemp recalled.

Her late mother, Adina Stewart, also passed on important lessons, she said. Stewart's fiery political activism and support of black nationalist Marcus Garvey enabled her daughter to understand that blacks had an important role to play

in society.

After she and her first husband divorced in 1965, she married James Kemp, a lawyer who also served as a union president. The couple separated but remained friends until Kemp's death in 1983.

These days, Springer-Kemp says

she's taking it easy, though she remains a member of Unite — Union of Needle Trades Industrial and Textile Employees.

"I'm not projecting the union as the best Sunday school on the block," she said. "But it helped me a great deal."

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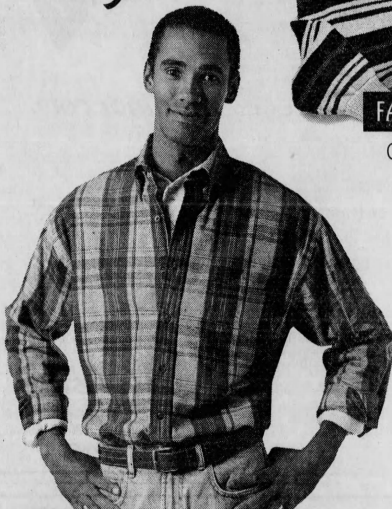
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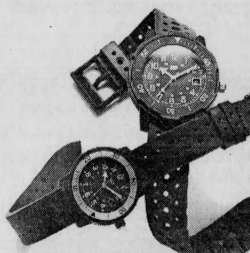
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