

## Gerald W. Johnson: Champion of Diversity at 101

By Kato Cooks

Gerald W. Johnson is a living, breathing LEGEND; reserved, dynamic, brilliant. He is a quiet cannon of activism. He is history alive.

Johnson is perhaps best known as co-founder, along with his spouse and business partner, Valerie Voorhies, of the San Francisco-based Small Business Exchange (SBE) newspapers in 1984. SO much happened before that.

### First, Rewind

On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin, then fifteen years old, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to relinquish her seat, on a public bus, to a white woman. In 1956, she, along with fellow plaintiffs Aurelia Browder, Susie McDonald, and Mary Louise Smith, prevailed at the United States Supreme Court (*Browder v. Gayle*) in striking down discrimination in public transportation.

Of course, we all remember Rosa Parks, also in Montgomery, Alabama, in the same situation

on December 1, 1955 (nine months after Claudette Colvin's arrest), which launched the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott. This shot the name of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. into the national consciousness.

In 1967, the Black-owned National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization (NEGRO), opened bus routes in Watts, an impoverished area of Los Angeles—this owing to the inferior, when it existed at all, bus service provided to residents.

But in 1946, nine years before Montgomery, Alabama, and nearly twenty years before the 1965 Watts Rebellion, and more than twenty years prior to the NEGRO bus service in Watts, Gerald W. Johnson was handling our business.

### He Refused to Move

Johnson had just returned to his hometown of New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1946, after World War II service in the United States Navy. Johnson and a companion were on a bus headed home when the driver directed him to move behind a "Coloreds Behind This Sign" demarcation. Johnson refused. The driver threatened to call the



police; still, Johnson refused with this retort: "You can call yo' mama. I ain't sittin' behind no sign." Some of us understand.

Prudence prevailed sufficiently for Johnson and his companion to disembark at the next stop.

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Valerie Voorhies at  
[vvv@sbeinc.com](mailto:vvv@sbeinc.com)

