

Celebrating SBE Legend Gerald W. Johnson

By Kato Cooks

Editor's note: Gerald W. Johnson, born and raised in New Orleans, always remembers his roots. His colleague in the publishing world recently wrote this article, which we gladly share with you. Happy near-century birthday, Mr. Johnson!

Gerald W. Johnson turns 98 on January 28, and I want to get a lead on celebrating this incredible man. I met Mr. Johnson in 1996 in Sacramento at a Croson Decision conference co-hosted by the Bay Area Contract Compliance Officers Association, of which I was a member and, later, vice president. I made it a point to interview him at his home in snippets over the following 20 years for a biography we anticipated, but life had other plans.

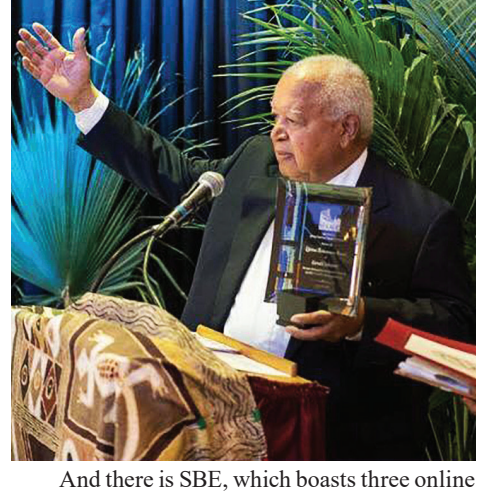
He is best known as co-founder, along with his wife and business partner, Valerie Voorhies Johnson, of the San Francisco-based Small Business Exchange (SBE) newspapers in 1984.

Johnson's legacy, however, extends back to at least 1946, when he arrived in San Francisco. There, he organized a successful picket line to

protest the dearth of Black workers employed in retail shops in the Filmore District. With that under his belt, he and some friends formed the Civic Progressive Union and took the protest to San Francisco's theatre district where he conducted his initial picket line as a solo effort (his friends didn't show up). Eventually, the local NAACP joined in with its support.

But it didn't stop there. Johnson organized in the Carpenters Union to get more Black business agents hired. And most notably, he got renaissance man Paul Robeson booked into a local Black church to perform at a time when Robeson was blacklisted in the United States and unable to secure concert bookings.

By the mid-1970s, the United Minority Business and Professional Association, founded by Johnson and under his direction, negotiated an affirmative action program for the reconstruction of San Francisco's public schools (aply called ABLE: Asian-Black-Latino Enterprises). (Reference: *The Postwar Struggle for Civil Rights, African-Americans in San Francisco, 1945-1975*, by Paul T. Miller.)



And there is SBE, which boasts three online and print publications covering the nation from coast to coast. "SBE was founded with the explicit purpose of providing small (minority-, woman-, disadvantaged-)

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