

constance powers Sam Evans, 105, Philadelphia Civic Leader (great front page obit)

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http://www.philly.com/inquirer/front_page/20080615_A_leader_of_Phila... Posted on Sun, Jun. 15, 2008 A leader of Phila. leaders By Rusty Pray, Dwight Ott and Tom Infield Inquirer Staff Writers Samuel L. Evans, 105, the patriarch of Philadelphia's African American leaders, a toughened veteran of the civil-rights struggle, and a longtime power broker in city politics, died Friday night at the St. Agnes Continuing Care Center in South Philadelphia. So many of us have stood on his shoulders and gotten an education in politics, government and other areas, Mayor Nutter said yesterday. He was a voice for the voiceless and a role model. Former Mayor W. Wilson Goode said: Sam Evans was a legend in this city for close to seven decades. He served presidents, governors and mayors. Mr. Evans, who was born a year before the Wright brothers' first successful airplane flight and during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, continued to do his daily toe-touches and knee bends until his health began to decline several months ago. He was well over 6 feet tall and walked ramrod straight. He would tell people, 'If you want to live to be 100, never take one problem and make it two.' That was his secret, his longtime friend Ethel S. Barnett said yesterday. Mr. Evans' status among black civic leaders years ago earned him the nickname Godfather. Though never elected to public office, he accumulated power and influence by adroitly manipulating the political process through generations of city leaders, black and white, through the crowded 1999 election for mayor, when several candidates sought the cachet that the name Sam Evans could still bring to a campaign. Through his American Foundation for Negro Affairs (AFNA), which he founded in 1968, Mr. Evans provided a mentoring program that helped hundreds of youths go on to professional careers. He was a passionate advocate for young people, Goode said. He advocated consistently for doors to be open for young who had potential to be doctors and lawyers and engineers. Among those who benefited was Nutter. I participated in AFNA during my junior year in high school, he said. It was part of the inspiration for my interest in medicine. I wanted to be a doctor. From at least 1963, when he organized Philadelphia's 43,000-member contingent to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic march on Washington, Mr. Evans was a force in Democratic city politics. On most days until recent years, he could be found in his modest office at 17th and Sansom Streets, which was decorated with statues, paintings, and photos of politicians, his family, and his extended family - two generations of physicians, lawyers, engineers and chemists. He sat behind a cluttered desk whose adornments included a constantly ringing telephone and a foot-high crystal pyramid he received from the Congressional Black Caucus in 2002. He called himself the oldest active Democrat in the nation. Though his actions sometimes put him at odds with nearly everyone else, he would be quick to tell you, in his distinctive, high-pitched, Southern-flavored voice, that it was worth it and that more needed to be done. My whole life has been built on one great principle: No race, religion, political ideology, and no commercial enterprise, is worth living if it destroys democracy, he said in a 2002 interview. Though different people viewed Mr. Evans from different angles, all - allies and opponents, blacks and whites - came to the conclusion that he was no man to trifle with. Mr. Evans' enemies readily acknowledged that he understood power, grabbed it at every opportunity, and wielded it to the benefit of many. But they alleged that he was a promoter whose chief production was himself; that he wanted to control every aspect of any project brought to his attention, whether or not he created it; that he undermined anyone who dared to proceed without him; and that his ego led him to make arbitrary decisions that hurt his causes. In 1999, Mr. Evans supported a white candidate, Martin Weinberg, over three black candidates in the Democratic mayoral primary, a contest won by John F. Street. Mr. Evans then endorsed a white Republican, Sam Katz, in the general election. Mr. Evans urged all whom I have touched for over 70 years to vote for Sam Katz . . . and if not, stay home or go fishing. That Street won a close election was interpreted by some as a sign of the erosion of Mr. Evans' influence in city politics, which he had built from a start as a committeeman in the old 20th Ward in North Philadelphia. At one time, though, Mr. Evans held considerable power and influence in Philadelphia. He pressured KYW-TV to muzzle its award-winning I-Team, which was disbanded, for raising too many questions about black businessmen and politicians, including Curtis Owens, once Evans' heir apparent. Owens' Comprehensive Health Services, a North Philadelphia nonprofit organization, was shut down in September 1984 after authorities began an investigation into possible misuse of federal money. Mr. Evans excommunicated Councilman Joseph Coleman from his Family of Black Leaders for supporting Bill Green for mayor in 1979 over Evans' protege, Charles Bowser. When he excommunicated a foe, he explained in a 1986 interview, it meant he would not play political ball with the opponent - and did not want anybody else to, either. Mr. Evans later extracted from Green a commitment of conscience, as the men jointly termed it, that landed a black man - Goode - in the managing director's office and put him on the road to becoming mayor in 1984. Mr. Evans loathed compromising his views - an attitude, he said, he got from his mother. My mother always told me that she'd rather I eat dirt with a knitting needle than to see me bow to my principles, he said. Mr. Evans' perception of the pervasiveness of ethnic intolerance was developed in the northern Florida community where he was born and lived until his teenage years. I saw five lynchings before reaching the age of 9, Mr. Evans said. The chance to attend school to get an acceptable education was as far from us as a castle in Spain. He was the youngest of six siblings. By age 6, he was working with family on a plantation, where he harvested cotton, tobacco, sugar cane and other crops for a company that owned the farm. He was big for his age, and he worked nearly as hard as his older brothers. He earned about 15 cents a day. I was brought up in a community where everything we did, we competed to be the best, Mr. Evans said. The more you did, the more you got paid. At 12, Mr. Evans moved with his family to Jacksonville, Fla., where he worked for a time unloading bricks, a job that bloodied his hands. He then worked as a dishwasher and a waiter for a hotel and as a longshoreman in Tampa, Fla., before heading north to New York City as a deckhand on a freighter at age 17. Overwhelmed by New York's noise and energy, he stayed only three days before moving to Philadelphia to live with his brother Perry, who later became founding pastor of Faith Baptist Church in North Philadelphia. Mr. Evans found work with Midvale Steel Co. in

Philadelphia at the unheard-of salary for a black man of \$8 a day. He left the company a few years later after coming down with rheumatic fever. He next worked as a porter, or what is known now as a janitor, for several retail businesses in Center City. The job that moved him in a direction that could not have been predicted, though, was at the Stark Piano store at 12th and Chestnut Streets. As he cleaned and dusted, he listened to the classical music that employees sometimes played on player pianos. He fell in love with it, he said. This was my first exposure to classical music, he said. One day, the manager came to me and instructed me to throw out a large box of player-piano rolls. I requested his permission to keep them. He took the rolls home to his brother's house, where there was a player piano, and played the rolls over and over, he said. The first roll he played was Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C sharp Minor. He would play along, his long, thin fingers seemingly destined to master the piano. They never did. Instead, 20 years later he became a successful impresario, bringing world-class musicians for chamber-music concerts to the Academy of Music. He was a very astute businessman. He sold the concerts as a subscription series and always filled the house, said Hugh Walsh Jr., manager of the Academy of Music, whose father previously held that job. He had a reputation in the music community of presenting the finest chamber groups and putting on the finest concerts. A resident of Center City for many years, Mr. Evans came to public attention in the late 1930s as the founder of Youth City, an anticrime organization among blacks in North Philadelphia based on Boys Town. One of the Youth City participants in the 1940s was future Philadelphia School Superintendent Constance Clayton. It was an interesting concept and very visionary, Clayton said several years ago. There were lots of academic-enrichment activities. We had a wonderful time, but it was made clear that we had to be good students and maintain academic standings. Sam Evans really is a man with a great ability to conceptualize and to pull things off. Youth City closed in 1943 after its building was sold. Mr. Evans was jailed briefly in the 1930s for picketing North Philadelphia stores that refused to hire African Americans and protesting Nazi activism in his community. At the time, he lived on North 13th Street. Over 60 percent of the consumers on Columbia Avenue were minorities, Mr. Evans wrote in an unpublished biographical sketch. Yet they could not get jobs in the stores or sit on the first floor of the theaters. His demonstration against a group called the Nazi bund, which met regularly at Turner Hall at Broad Street and Columbia Avenue, now Cecil B. Moore Avenue, nearly caused a riot around 1934. It led to the arrest of 75 young people and Mr. Evans. At trial, a judge ruled that Mr. Evans and others had a constitutional right to picket. It was a double victory for Mr. Evans as the street protests effectively ended the Nazi meetings at Turner Hall, he said. We Americans . . . would rather ride in an ox cart or a covered wagon in a democracy than in a Rolls-Royce driven by a dictator, he wrote in a letter to the Philadelphia Daily News in 2002. By the early 1940s, Mr. Evans was being referred to as a lieutenant of John B. Kelly, the brickwork contractor who had become a city Democratic chairman. His first government job was as Philadelphia coordinator for black activities in the U.S. Office of Civilian Defense's physical-fitness program. Mr. Evans later defected to the Republican Party, then dominant in the city, and was rewarded by the GOP state administration, which in 1946 appointed him secretary of the state athletic commission, a post traditionally reserved for black politicians. He became a Republican committeeman in the 20th Ward, where he was arrested for illegal voting assistance in 1950, but the tide in Philadelphia was starting to run the other way. Then, in the 1960s, he became a Democrat again and a force to be reckoned with. In 1964, he was a vice chairman in Southeastern Pennsylvania for President Lyndon Johnson's campaign. State Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Phila.), a leader in the House, said yesterday that he could not help but think of how proud Mr. Evans must have been in recent weeks to see a black man, Barack Obama, become the presumptive Democratic nominee for president. Dwight Evans and Sam Evans are not related. His was a different era, a different time, Dwight Evans said. He was a trailblazer for Philadelphia and the African American community. Mr. Evans' wife, Edna Hoye, whom he married in 1926, died in 1988. He is survived by a daughter, Retha B. Kelley; four grandchildren; 10 great-grandchildren; and 22 great-great-grandchildren. Funeral arrangements for were pending yesterday. Contact staff writer Tom Infield at 610-313-8205 or tinfi...@phillynews.com. Copyright 2008

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