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Sign in the Sky Changed Life of Local Civil Rights Leader

By ROBERT STANTON, Staff

AS he listened to venomous racial taunts hurled against him at a boycott he helped organize in Mississippi, **Ernest McMillan** knew it was time to blaze a new path.

It wasn't just the fear for his safety and life that changed his mind, he recalls.

After all, McMillan often organized rallies against police brutality and economic exploitation on behalf of the Delta region's poor black residents as regional coordinator for the United League of Mississippi. His name had become a household word in the civil rights arena.

McMillan had grown accustomed to the racial epithets and threats, especially with his work in the 1960s as a volunteer with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee throughout the South.

But he wasn't quite prepared for the sizzling emotions that erupted during his group's 1979 boycott of businesses in Drew, Miss.

"I could see two (military) jet planes forming a cross in the air as a warning not to have the march," McMillan said. "The vapor trails loomed over our heads as we marched.

"The awesome powers wielded made me reconsider," said McMillan, 56, now living in the Fifth Ward. "I basically threw darts at the map to see where I wanted to go next. I chose Houston because Houston represented good hope in the New South."

Not to mention that he had some well-placed friends in the city - people like U.S. Rep. Mickey Leland, who died in 1989 on a mission to Ethiopia; Deloyd Parker, executive director of SHAPE Community Center; and poet/playwright Thomas Meloncon.

McMillan, who studied history and philosophy at Morehouse College in Atlanta, wanted to carry on his family's tradition of being positive role models in the community and helping to empower others to succeed, he said.

He landed a job in Houston as a drug counselor with Alternative Drug Abuse Program Inc., and two years later, in 1982, became project director of Communities in Schools Houston.

But as he watched the rising ranks of young people, particularly black and Hispanic youths, struggle with poverty, family violence and drug abuse in their homes, McMillan decided to take a more hands-on approach.

In 1984, he launched the **Fifth Ward Enrichment Program Inc.** as a vehicle to motivate and equip young men at risk for dropping out of school or going to prison.

Today, the enrichment program serves 500 youths and their families with innovative programs and curricula, most developed by McMillan and his staff. The array of services include after-school programs, youth violence prevention, life skills management and educational workshops.

Other innovative programs include Young Fathers and Families, which focuses on the challenges of fatherhood, and a Teen Enterprise Center that helps young men to launch their own businesses.

The organization program operated for a decade under the umbrella of Community Partners, but branched out as an independent entity in 1996. Since then, McMillan points out, the organization has tripled its size and scope of services and veered into new program territory.

In January, McMillan will trade his executive director's hat for a new role as chief executive officer of the organization, focusing on strategic planning. Charles Savage, who manages the program's Teen Enterprise Center, will take over the day-to-day operations as director of programs.

While the **Fifth Ward program** is geared mostly toward young men, some young women take part in programs such as Young Peacemakers, which teaches nonviolence and community support.

With a full-time staff of 30 and a \$1.5 million budget, the program receives about half of its funding from federal and state dollars, with the rest coming from private foundations and corporations.

Armed with a 15-year track record of success, McMillan said he plans to focus on new programs and share the insights he has learned with other community organizations.

"We don't anticipate much growth in terms of size," McMillan said. "But we do want to consolidate our ideas and provide technical assistance and export our ideas for others who may want to emulate our program or start some feature of our program."

Many of McMillan's new ideas surfaced as he lay in a hospital bed in fall 1999 after undergoing quadruple bypass heart surgery.

"During the 90 to 120 days I was out recuperating, it gave me a chance to think and reprioritize my life and where we were going as an agency," said McMillan, a father of three. "That type of inspiration was God-sent."

"As a result, my health is better, my diet is better and I exercise now," he said. "Personally, spiritually and physically, I'm a lot better off."

Those who know McMillan say his concern for others, coupled with his selfless attitude, help to bridge communities and solve real-life problems.

"His success comes from the commitment he has shown our youths, and not being selfish about it," said Earl Fisher, director of operations at SHAPE Community Center. "Our organizations have always worked together on joint projects, and we share techniques and strategies whenever we can."

In his new role as chief executive officer, McMillan said he would continue to develop new curricula and advocate more programs for youths at the local and state levels.

"We need to consider public policy issues to address the fact that our (minority) kids are in prisons in far disproportionate numbers," he said. "And we've got to address the successful re-entry of youths into society once they have been locked up. We want to investigate some of the disparities."

Barry Barnes, chairman of the **Fifth Ward program** board of directors, predicts McMillan will help solidify the organization's future in his new role.

"We are pleased that Ernest will step into this important role," Barnes said. "By doing so he will still be able to make invaluable contributions to the agency by directing more of his attention to fund-raising, mentoring staff and, of course, the young men served in the program."