

Introductory Comments by Jim Schnur

Florida has an interesting history, but unfortunately one with many painful moments. In the years after Reconstruction, Florida's political leaders joined those of other Southern states in perpetuating a system based upon economic imbalance and racial segregation. Where plantations once existed, sharecropping appeared. In some ways, our state led the region: In 1885, eleven years before the Supreme Court called for "separate but equal" facilities in Plessy, that were never equal at all, our state constitution required segregated schools.

By the early twentieth century, lynchings and violence were on the rise. Although these events occurred with alarming frequency in rural areas, certain events do stand out. In November 1920, following an election, the small citrus farming community of Ocoee, west of Orlando, suffered from violence that resulted in the deaths of an unknown number of blacks, and the disappearance of more than 400 who left the area. Many of us have heard the story of Rosewood, a settlement near Cedar Key that was destroyed in a massacre in January 1923. Though people throughout America followed the travesty of justice faced by the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama in 1931, Florida experienced a similar episode in Lake County in 1949 as the Groveland four were arrested by a sheriff named Willis McCall, a man

who went to his grave proud of running Lake County as a 20th century plantation. On Christmas 1951, state NAACP leader Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriette died.

Residents of St. Petersburg also lived in separate but unequal settings throughout the 20th century. While some lauded our city as “The Sunshine City,” “The Retirement Capital of America,” “The City that Marketing Built,” yes ... even “God’s Waiting Room,” there were clouds in the sky, no matter what the *Evening Independent*, the onetime afternoon newspaper, had promised.

It was in this city, a couple of months before America entered the Second World War, that a child was born. A child who learned to read at an incredibly young age, a child who lived in an area very near to—yet so far away from—the postcard memories of the waterfront, the green benches, the elegant hotels, and the beaches that countless tourists enjoyed, yet that he and his family were prohibited from using by law, custom, and tradition.

As this child grew into a teen, the Supreme Court invalidated Plessy in the May 1954 Brown decision by claiming separate but equal was inherently unequal. So, what changed? Well, in Pinellas County, school officials went on a huge building campaign in the black community. Gibbs Junior College sprouted up on the Gibbs High campus. Other schools were built. Why? To encourage integration or expand opportunities for children of African descent? No, they did this instead in a

half-hearted and half-century late attempt to meet the goals of Plessy and prevent integration!

As he studied in high school, a number of students at all-black Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, along with some support and involvement from a handful students at all-white Florida State University, launched the Tallahassee Bus Boycott in the late spring of 1956. Many historians see this as an early milestone of the student protest movements of the 1960s. In the spirit of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, students and their supporters brought the bus company to its knees for its failure to end segregated seating.

How did the state react? By the fall of 1956, our legislators in Tallahassee followed in the well-worn path of Joseph McCarty, creating a committee named after Senator Charley Johns. Its role? To condemn the so-called "race agitators," to perpetuate segregation, and to destroy the personal and professional lives of many who challenged it. As Mr. Yeshitela graduated from high school, the public officials in his native state sent a clear message to anyone trying to challenge the status quo or address persistent patterns of racist inequality: Do so at your own peril.

He, along with many others, refused to back down. Over the years, many have claimed that the work of Omali Yeshitela and the Uhuru Movement is controversial. Some in the audience may disagree with some of the message.

But, what I would ask all of us to consider, as we look at his life's journey, is that Mr. Yeshitela was not raised in a vacuum. The conditions he and others experienced in the Sunshine City have shaped his life, and his activism. It is my honor to welcome you to this event, "An Evening with Omali Yeshitela," as we examine our history and learn from a leader in the movement to ensure that Africans have a strong voice in their social, political, and economic destinies.