

PUBLICATION

Commitment to Community: Goodwill Homes for Children

Authors: David L. Bearman

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Goodwill Homes was started in Memphis by Reverend J.W. Golden, who tasked my dad, Leo Bearman Jr., with going to local churches which would donate one Sunday's tithing to provide funding. Other funds came from radio station WDIA, which was then known as the "goodwill station." Black children who were dependents (whose parents had passed away, been arrested or were just not there) were sent to juvenile detention centers; white kids went to St. Peters.

Goodwill was created originally to address this disparity and to give Black children a place to be housed other than jail. Shortly after the original facility was built, Goodwill pioneered group homes for kids where they had a "house parent" and the kids could live in the home. It gave them some ability to look and feel like kids whose home reality was similar to those from a regular family house.

Dad helped create and fund it, then was president for years. He continued on as a lawyer, advocate and general problem-solver (legal, financial, political and otherwise). At one point when the project started, the Ku Klux Klan distributed flyers condemning dad – a Jewish man helping Black kids. One time, the FBI even called to warn that the Ku Klux Klan was going to burn a cross in our yard, which, thankfully, never happened. Upon my return from law school, I was designated by Barbara Motley to serve on the board and ultimately became president.

In fact, my first jury trial was defending Goodwill Homes when the organization fired an individual hired to do inventory after learning the individual could not count accurately. At the trial, which was in front of Judge Lanier, the plaintiff accused Goodwill Homes of "performing voodoo" on her. That was her rationale when, in depositions, she could not correctly answer the problem my father presented, which was, "If you have three crates of oranges with 25 oranges per crate, how many oranges do you have?"