

Kentucky Commission On Human Rights

Working to eradicate discrimination

KCHR Director takes new post

Joins UN Tribunal at The Hague

The Kentucky Commission on Human Rights on April 26 accepted the resignation of its executive director of 26 months, Linda Strite Murnane, to allow her to remain with the United Nations at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Ret. U.S. Air Force Colonel and Chief Circuit Judge Murnane has been on temporary leave from her post at the Kentucky Human Rights Commission to serve the International War Crimes Tribunal since November of last year.

In a tearful statement made during a teleconference to her commission board and staff, Judge Murnane announced that she had been extended an offer to remain with the tribunal, which caused her to have to choose between her planned return to the commission at the end of this month or to remain with the International War Crimes Tribunal charged with resolving crimes



Chair Priscilla Johnson and Executive Director Linda Strite Murnane at a commission meeting.

against humanity arising from the fall of the former Yugoslavia.

In her resignation, Executive Director Murnane specifically praised her staff and thanked them for their exceptional service to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. She also highlighted the support she has received from the commissioners, and specifically, Chair Priscilla Johnson.

Murnane said: "I'd like to note that the importance of domestic human rights programs, such as the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, is that hopefully we will never see the kind of hatred and discrimination the world looks upon as requiring the much more dramatic stage of a world tribunal, by ensuring each and every day that citizens and residents in our commonwealth are afforded the dignity to which each person is entitled in the limited fields under our statute [The Kentucky Civil Rights Act KRS 344] of housing, employment and access to public accommodations."

Linda Murnane came to the commission in February 2005, soon after her retirement from the Air Force, and at an important time for the agency, which followed the resignation of former director Beverly Watts and the announcement that a Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission would be convened to study the efficiency and effectiveness of the commission.

In her first statement to the press upon her arrival, Ms. Murnane said she thought she would be the steady hand that held the boat, and she worked quickly to bring the significantly understaffed agency up from 21 to 36 members, worked in full cooperation with the Blue Ribbon Panel that released its final report last February, and led the agency to a 47-year high in the number of new

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Linda Strite Murnane

discrimination complaints. Chair Priscilla Johnson remarked that one of Linda Murnane's many significant contributions during her

leadership was the improvement in employee morale. In its final report to Governor Ernie Fletcher, the Blue Ribbon Panel noted the outstanding leadership of Murnane, and urged the governor and the legislature to add about \$430,000 a year to the commission's budget.

Though the legislature this year did not pass the two bills that contained language that would have given emergency additional funds to the commission, citing that this was a non-budget year and disagreements between the House and the Senate, legislators from both sides of the aisle praised Judge Murnane's leadership and her success in making the legislature aware of the commission's important work and its urgent need for more funding to be considered during the next budget session.

"This is a very sad day for our commissioners and staff," said Chair Priscilla Johnson at today's teleconference. "Linda's leadership, direction, and passion for the work of human rights have changed the face of this agency, and will carry us far into the future. She will be sorely missed."•

Blue Ribbon final report

The Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission studying the efficiency and efficacy of the Human Rights Commission issued its final report on February 9. Among its recommendations, the group advised of KCHR's need for about \$430,000 a year in additional funding.

The group also recommended a new mediation unit to help the commission resolve discrimination complaints, something the commission has asked for the last three legislative sessions.

The commission wishes to thank all the members of the Blue Ribbon Commission for its hard work, which took over a year, and its dedication to assisting Kentucky's Human Rights Commission.

The task force also supported the state human rights commission's partnerships with its 18 local human rights commissions, stating the importance of the local commissions in helping Kentucky reach all of its 120 counties. •



Members of the Blue Ribbon panel presented the final report to Gov. Ernie Fletcher in his office. From left to right are Judge Larry Smith, Mr. William Cofield, Sharon Fields, Governor Fletcher, Rev. Awkard, and KCHR Commission Priscilla Johnson.

43rd Great Black Kentuckian is noted actress



Nellie Conley, known on stage as Madame Sul-Te-Wan, was a pioneering stage and film actor who became one of the most prominent black

performers in Hollywood during the silent era, with a career that spanned more than seven decades. She was the first black actress to have a Hollywood studio contract.

Conley will become the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights 43rd Great Black Kentuckian in the poster series designed to teach students about civil rights history in the state.

Ms. Conley's poster will be unveiled at 9:30 p.m., Friday, June 1, at Actors Theatre in Louisville during the Juneteenth Legacy Theatre production of *Voices of the Spirit in my Soul*.

The Louisville native is best known as the African American actress who in 1915 was contracted to appear in one of the most controversial films in American Cinematic history, D. W. Griffith's ground-breaking, *Birth of a Nation*.

Young Nellie's interest in performing was awakened when, as a young girl, she would deliver laundry to Louisville's Buckingham Theater. There the white female actors, who were her mother's customers, often invited Conley to watch the shows. Quietly, she studied the entertainers: their dance steps, vocal mannerisms and routines. The following day, young Conley would rehearse the act in front of classmates, vowing that, she too, would be an actor someday.

Throughout the 1920s, Madame Sul-Te-Wan would establish herself as a publicly recognizable character actress, most often appearing in "Mammy" roles alongside such popular actors of the silent film era as Tom Mix, Leatrice Joy, and Mae Marsh. Some of her most memorable roles of the era were in the 1927 James W. Horne directed Buster Keaton comedy *College*, and in the 1929 Erich von Stroheim-directed drama *Queen Kelly*, starring Gloria Swanson.

As a black woman in the period of segregation, Conley was consistently limited to roles as minor characters who were usually convicts, native women, or domestic servants, such as her role as a cook in the 1933 box-office hit, *King Kong*.

In 1937, Conley was cast in the memorable role of "Tituba" in the film, *Maid of Salem*, a dramatic retelling of the events surrounding the Salem witch trials of 1692. The film was financially successful, and Conley's performance garnered critical praise.

Despite the motion picture industry's limitations for African American performers, Conley worked consistently throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

Conley played in a number of silent films and many award winning features. Some of her roles included: "Slave," in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), "Maid," in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), "Hattie," in *King Kong* (1933), "Jim Alley's Mother," in *In Old Chicago* (1937), "Carmen's Grandma," in *Carmen Jones* (1954), "Witch Woman," in *Tarzan and the Trappers* (1958), and she also appeared in the classic musical, *Porgy and Bess* (1959).

The successful actress once defended what some critics said were demeaning roles for African Americans: "I'd rather *play* a maid than *be* one," she said. Conley died February 1, 1959. She was 85 years old.

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Kentucky Commission on Human Rights

Linda Strite Murnane, Executive Director

332 W Broadway, Suite 700, Louisville, Kentucky 40202 . Phone: 502.595.4024 . Toll-free: 800.292.5566 . TDD: 502.595.4084 . Fax: 502.595.4801

E-mail: kchr.mail@ky.gov

VISIT US ONLINE AT www.kchr.ky.gov

KCHR's 2nd International Open House

On March 22, the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights with the Louisville Metro Office for International Affairs hosted the second open house celebrating the Kentucky Human Rights International Day.

About 30 leaders from immigrant communities across the state attended this important event. The open house provided an opportunity for people to tour the office of the Kentucky Human Rights Commission, and meet the commissioners and staff.

The goal of the open house was to ensure that leaders from the state's immigrant communities have personal contacts at the commission, are aware of our services and have a voice in our work to ensure adequate services for immigrant residents. Attendees had an opportunity to share about pertinent issues in their communities



Open House attendees and KCHR staff listened to a discussion about Kentucky immigrant populations.

Representatives from our partner agencies such as the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Kentucky Field Office, U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Kentucky Field Office, the Kentucky Housing Corporation and the Consulate of Mexico in Indianapolis met with attendees as well. The open house was

part of KCHR's ongoing efforts to include all minority populations in our civil rights work to ensure that every resident in Kentucky has equal access to housing, employment and public accommodations. "We must work together to help foster a climate where all residents of Kentucky may thrive," said KCHR immigrant outreach supervisor Juan Pena. •

KCHR Education and Outreach on the Go

Kentucky Human Rights Commission Field Supervisor Juan Pena appeared on the "Nuestro Rincon" show on April 21 on WKRC-Channel 12 in Cincinnati.

The show, which means "Our Corner," in Spanish, reaches thousands of viewers in the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky area. Mr. Pena spoke for about 20 minutes on the services that KCHR provides. He also noted that Robert Asseo of Boone County is the first Hispanic member of the Board of Commissioners at KCHR. Juan is working with Sasha Rionda, the host of "Nuestro Rincon," to work with KCHR on future events.

Kentucky Human Rights Commission Field Representative Kevin Gunn moderated a regional local commission roundtable on April 21 in Hopkinsville. The event was attended by about 20 people from the Paducah Human Rights Commission, the Hopkinsville Human Relations Commission and the Franklin Human Rights Commission.

KCHR has been asking the local commissions to share their ideas and innovations. The roundtable discussion on April 21 included issues such as police/community relations, keeping local commissions focused on their work and building bridges with other social service agencies.

Kentucky Human Rights Field Supervisor John C.K. Fisher on April 26 participated in a program sponsored by the Women's Crisis Center of Northern Kentucky to empower crime victims. The program was held at the Syndicate ballroom in Newport and featured speeches and information from victims' rights organizations and social service agencies that provide shelter, advice and referrals for crime victims.

Mr. Fisher spoke about the services that KCHR offers to fight discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations and financial transactions. •

Fair Housing Month in April



Governor Ernie Fletcher, seated at his desk, above, declared April Fair Housing Month in Kentucky. With him on the second row are: Housing Enforcement Officer LiAndrea Goatley of KCHR, Shayla Johnson of the Fair Housing Council Lexington, Fair Housing Coordinator Toni Smith of the Kentucky Housing Corporation, Vicky Ray of the U.S. Housing & Urban Development (HUD) Louisville Field Office, Housing Enforcement Supervisor Cynthia Thornburg Schnell of KCHR, and Commission Chair Priscilla Johnson of KCHR. On the third row are: Housing Enforcement Officer Michael Foree of KCHR, Rick McQuady of the Kentucky Housing Corporation, and Commissioner Thurmond Coleman Sr. of KCHR. •

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