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**Los Angeles NAACP Life Achievement Award:
Still Crazy (Controversial) After All These Years
Between The Lines**

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I had a déjà vu moment last week while watching Los Angeles Clippers owner, Donald Sterling, receive the Los Angeles NAACP Chapter's Life Achievement Award. Watching Sterling try to find the words of why he merited the award was like watching George Wallace try to convince black voters that he had changed from his segregationist ways in the 1972 Presidential election. It just wasn't selling, given he'd been sued for discriminating against black renters in his many Westside high-rises over the past few years, and then sued by his longest black employee, superstar legend, Elgin Baylor, in the past year for running his basketball team like a plantation (again for race discrimination). So when the Los Angeles NAACP announced they were honoring Sterling, a collective "oh boy" shot through the community. This was a controversial pick if there ever was one. Some might even call it, "crazy."

Now I'm not saying that Donald Sterling is a racist, but he certainly seems to have his share of problems with black people. Maybe it's just coincidental, that all these black people are suing him for race discrimination - but that would be a problem for me to give the chapter's highest honor while all this stuff is still going on. At the end of the day (night), all that can be said was that he gives kids tickets to basketball games (how else would you get them to a Clipper game?). It was enough to choke on your chicken. And then he left the award sitting on the table while he left for the hotel bar. Yep. But this still might not have been the branch's craziest pick.

This whole awards fiasco with the L.A. NAACP took me back, way back, to 1987 and Century Plaza where this same chapter gave this same controversial award to singer Frank Sinatra right after he was the only major entertainer to play Sun City, a South African resort, during apartheid. The choice to honor Sinatra hit like a bombshell. It divided chapter members, officers (I was first Vice President at the time-and I opposed the award), and most importantly, the community that was firmly in the midst of an anti-apartheid movement. Clearly, the choice of Sinatra was about a financially cash

strapped branch and the need for Sinatra to get some cover from the bad press he had gotten globally. He needed some black people and the branch needed some money. It was a marriage made in hell. Even the national organization issued a statement that branches make their own award selection (read that as: We don't have anything to do this and don't agree with it). If they agreed with it, it would have been no need to make the statement. They had to make one because protesters were threatening to boycott the NAACP and its sponsors. Imagine the "boycotter" being boycotted. Those were crazy days. Sinatra raised the branch \$400,000 and got some press to deflect the other press he was getting-mainly about the branch members and community being divided over him receiving the award. And he stayed the whole dinner. But it tore the branch up forever. I became President the following year but the Sinatra planners in the branch sought revenge, and blew up the branch in the process. The branch has never recovered.

Fast forward twenty years later, when Donald Sterling's "race issues" first came to light over refusing to rent to black tenants. Once the lawsuit hit in the national press, the "un-Donald" was looking for some black friends. Sterling couldn't get no press so he started buying his own press, space in the *L.A. Times*, running ads showing black occupants in his buildings. Then he started inviting black leaders to parties-taking pictures of them and putting them in the paper around his picture. Insulting but they put themselves in that position. Some demanded he stop, and he did. Then he started having his own award banquets, honoring-you guessed it - himself. It really took megalomania to another level. But finally, Sterling got someone to "bite the cookie." It was the toothless Los Angeles NAACP. I heard they really needed the money, and with this being there 100th anniversary and all, may have been a little anxious. The community was going to support them (once an NAACP'er, always an NAACP'er) regardless of who the honoree was for their 100th year (the branch's 95th year). I just hope Sterling didn't get them for cheap. But I know he got 'em. And thus, déjà vu all over again (as Yogi Berra once said).

I hate to talk about my old branch like that, but the truth is the truth. No longer a leader, but a worthy coalition player, the branch did take a role in getting UCLA to admit more African American freshmen. And they did honor UCLA's Chancellor for doing so last week. But did they get Donald Sterling to rent to more African Americans? You would think that information was readily available...but it wasn't. Did he settle with Elgin Baylor? Baylor is my all-time favorite of the pre-1980 Lakers and the Lakers first star, but the Lakers never hired him in the organization after his playing days. The Clippers did, for marketing and branding reasons. Baylor presided over twenty years of the worst basketball you ever wanted to watch largely because, with Sterling looking over his shoulder, he didn't control purse strings. So he drafted college star after college star, who walked away superstars when they became free agents because wouldn't re-up. Baylor deserved a better landing than he got. He would've been a great lifetime achievement honoree. Sterling dumping Elgin Baylor was like the Dodgers trading Jackie Robinson to San Francisco Giants, it was cruel and unnecessary. Baylor deserved (and still deserves) a victory lap in Los Angeles. Instead, the NAACP gave Donald Sterling a victory lap. And he left the cup on the table.

Boy, that NAACP Life Achievement Award is a tricky one to gauge. You never know just who earned it, deserved it or straight out bought it. One thing's for sure... It's still crazy (controversial) after all these years.


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