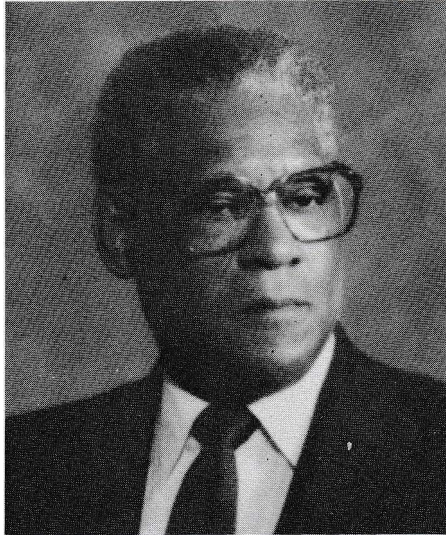


The Honorable K. Leroy Irvis: Father of Act 101

Karl H. Lewis, Ph.D.

"There are those men and women who spend their lives striving, struggling and, all too often, sacrificing themselves in order to make life better for the rest of us in the human society. Such people deserve to be recognized....K. Leroy Irvis is one such person..."



Mr. Irvis, the first African American to serve as Speaker in any of the United States during the time between the reconstruction era and the present, stands as the most important African American political leader of the Commonwealth and notably the first African American speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

He was born in Saugerties, New York on December 27, 1919 to Frank and Harriet Irvis and attended public schools in Albany, New York where he was immersed in numerous scholarly activities. He was graduated summa cum laude from New York State Teachers College (now the University of the State of New York at Albany) with his A.B. degree in History and English, and later (in 1939) the University of New York at Albany, with his M.A. degree. He moved in October 1939 to Baltimore, Maryland, where he lived with Mrs. Norma Marshall, mother of Thurgood Marshall, and at age 19 began teaching in the public schools. In 1945, Mr. Irvis moved to Pittsburgh to direct public relations for the Urban League; and subsequently

in 1947, as an active community leader, he organized one of the first demonstrations in the United States against downtown department stores for their discriminatory hiring practices against African Americans.

In 1954, Mr. Irvis received his law degree from the University of Pittsburgh. While attending the Pitt Law School, he served on the Law Review Staff, became a member of Phi Beta Kappa Honorary Fraternity, and was twice awarded the Owens Fellowship.

Mr. Irvis began his political career in 1958 when he was elected to the House of Representatives from Pittsburgh's Hill District. Subsequently, he was re-elected to that seat for fifteen consecutive terms. During his third term, Mr. Irvis was elected Democratic Caucus Chairman and became the first African American representative elected to the House leadership. In following sessions, Mr. Irvis rose through the ranks of leadership as Majority Caucus Chairman, Minority Whip, Majority Leader and Speaker. His election as Speaker in May, 1977 by the House was unanimous and represented the only time, other than the election of Benjamin Franklin as Speaker during the Revolutionary War period, that a Speaker was elected by acclamation.

Mr. Irvis sponsored over 1600 pieces of legislation addressing his concern for education, civil rights, health, consumer protection, prison reform, housing and governmental reform. His most noted achievements include the sponsorship and passage of legislation creating the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Equal Opportunity Program, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, and the Minority Business Development Authority. Also, Mr. Irvis introduced on the floor of the House the idea of a Community College System in the commonwealth and is credited by his fellow representatives as being the "father" of the Community College System. Because of his leadership in the state, his legislation created the University of Pittsburgh as a state related university.

As a legislative leader, Mr. Irvis supported reforms to promote efficiency and accountability in the business of the House of Representatives. Such reforms include the creation of the House Ethics Committee, the Lobbyist Registration Act, the Legislative Audit Advisory Committee, and the House Partisan Management Committee.

Mr. Irvis was a delegate to the 1967-68 Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention and the Democratic National Conventions of 1968, 1972, and 1980. At the 1980 Democratic National Convention, Mr. Irvis served as Vice Chairman of the Pennsylvania Delegation and as Convention Co-Chairman, again, a first for an African American. In 1982, Mr. Irvis was elected to serve as a member of the Democratic National Committee.

Mr. Irvis' civic involvements include membership on the Boards of the United Black Front, Community Action Pittsburgh, Neighborhood Assistance Advisory Board, Three Rivers Improvement and Development, Greater Pittsburgh Business Development Corporation, the Post Gazette Dapper Dan Club, the Bidwell Cultural and Training Center, and WQED Public Television. In addition, Mr. Irvis is a life member of the NAACP, and has served as a Trustee of the University of Pittsburgh and as a member of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School Advisory Committee. He has also served as Adjunct Professor of Law at the University of Pittsburgh and is currently the Distinguished Presidential Scholar at Temple University.

A wood sculptor, painter and published poet, K. Leroy Irvis actively participates in and supports fine arts. His wood sculptures have been displayed in exhibits throughout the United States and Europe, and he has promoted the arts in Pennsylvania by supporting legislation creating the Pennsylvanian Council on the Arts. In 1977, he initiated the Legislative School Art Exhibit, an annual event which gives Commonwealth students the opportunity to display their works in the Capitol. A model airplane enthusiast since childhood, Mr. Irvis designs, builds and flies model radio controlled airplanes.

Many organizations have honored Mr. Irvis for his public service and commitment to civil rights, education, business, and commerce. In 1979, Lincoln University of Pennsylvania conferred upon him an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Law. He was also honored for his role in establishing the Community College System by being awarded an honorary doctorate from the Community College of Harrisburg. He also was honored by his alma mater (S.U.N.Y. at Albany) with the Honorary Doctor of Law.

Mr. Irvis is married to the former Cathryn L. Edwards who holds a degree in Early Childhood Development. Speaker and Mrs. Irvis are the parents of one daughter, Sherri and a son, Reginald, both graduates of the University of Pittsburgh. The Irvis' are the proud grandparents of Danae Lee, Elyse, G. Alexander, and Alyssa Cathryn.

Politics of Education: a Conversation with the Honorable K. Leroy Irvis

Karl H. Lewis, Ph.D.

Most of the current Act 101 Directors do not know Mr. Irvis personally, but know him by reputation. Admired and respected, his opinion is still of great value to all members of the Act 101 community. April 20, 1996, Pittsburgh, PA.

(KHL) ***The Act 101 Program has been one of the most successful programs of its type in the entire USA. Did you envision that it would be so successful?***

(KLI) I had hoped that it would be successful, but very frankly I didn't have any long range plans. I wish that I could tell you that I had the results of a scientific survey or that we pondered this question for many months and sorted through the data and all the rest of it; but to tell you the truth, it didn't happen that way at all. The way it really happened will sound funny but it will be historical and true. In 1969, I was elected to top leadership for the first time. Top leader

ship means majority leader and speaker. Up to that time, I had been caucus chair and whip, but now I was leader and my job was to watch over the budget and make sure that the bills that we supported got through the legislature. Incidentally, the majority leader's job is the toughest job I've ever filled in all of the years I've worked. So here I was for the first time sitting behind the majority leader's desk ready to run things when I got a notice to report to the fifth floor of the Capital Building on the Sunday night just before we went into session. The notice peaked my interest because it said no staff or assistants should attend, and frankly, I had never been on the fifth floor before; but I didn't know that this meeting always took place among the top leaders of both parties of the House and Senate just before a budget is settled. First the Democrats and Republicans meet separately, then they all meet in one unit and argue about what the actual budget is going to be. For all practical purposes, the budget is formed at this meeting rather than on the floors of the House and Senate or in a formal committee hearing. The reason I hadn't been there before is because I wasn't a top leader, and only the top leaders are permitted to attend. As it turned out, everyone at the meeting was jockeying for his own concerns regarding the budget, and I was forced to come up with my input. Like the birth of Athena from the forehead Zeus, I proposed \$5 million in the budget for disadvantaged college students; and after fighting over the idea for about 4 to 5 minutes, we settled on \$2.5 million. The meeting ultimately ended around 2 a.m. We shook hands, said good night, and returned to our hotel rooms. The next morning, I summoned my staff and told them that I had \$2.5 million in the budget for disadvantaged college students. They in turn asked me "what's a disadvantaged student?" and I told them "that's what I am paying you to find out". Now that's how it actually happened. There was not any long scientific research at all. My only explanation is that it came out of my whole life's training, my parent's training, and my immersion in the Civil Rights Movement. It was a time and chance to do something for people who needed something done on their behalf. As it happened, the amount appropriated was reduced to \$1 million, but we had the money in the budget before we had the Act written up.

(KHL) ***Then, because of its history, you couldn't say that the original intent has changed.***

(KLI) Oh, no. My intention, then and now, was and is that every child in the Commonwealth with the capability of being educated should be educated. The only real resource we have in life is the ability of an individual to create, and it would be short sighted and stupid on our part, both white and black, not to develop that potential to the fullest.

(KHL) ***Given that there were not many advocates for the disadvantaged in 1971, how difficult was it for you to get the Act 101 Bill through the PA legislature?***

- (KLI) No difficulty whatsoever, the legislators knew less about the proposed Act than I did. Moreover, they would not have taken the chance to oppose me as a leader. You don't go against the leader unless you are a fool and want the leader to ignore your bill when it comes up.
- (KHL) ***Today, many legislators and educators maintain that developmental education, i.e., providing funded assistance for educationally disadvantaged students, is not appropriate or cost-effective at the post-secondary level because it is a duplication of funding. How would you suggest that the Act 101 educators and directors respond to this criticism?***
- (KLI) I think that they ought to highlight the success of Act 101. It seems obvious to me that it was and still is needed, far beyond my vision. As a matter of fact, when you realize the high number of states that have adopted the idea and see the number of young people, white, black and in between, that have benefitted, it seems foolish to me to criticize developmental education as being not necessary. Obviously, the other programs have not satisfied all the needs, otherwise this program would not have grown the way it has. When you have a program that is so widely successful, I think that it is foolish to tamper with it. Let it alone, let it grow.
- (KHL) ***Act 101 Directors place priority on accountability, maintain detailed records on their students, and submit regular reports as required and/or requested by the State. How can these data be used most effectively among legislators to demonstrate the value of the continuation of the program?***
- (KLI) First of all, you should try to get to know the legislators personally. Know the ones in your district particularly, and as many of the others as you can. Once they know you and understand what you are trying to do, most of them will be supportive. Also, it adds to your weight of argument if you can give them facts about the students in their districts. Volumes of data are for college professors, researchers, data banks, and libraries, not legislators.
- (KHL) ***What you are really saying is that Act 101 Directors must get involved.***
- (KLI) Absolutely. Having them on campus for lunch, etc., is nice, but visiting them in their offices and talking to them one on one is better. In addition, if you have young people who can go to their representatives and say, for example, "Mr. Irvis, my mother and father live in your district and I am grateful to you for your support of Act 101 because otherwise I would not have been able to go to school", it would be very effective. Remember, legislators are human (even though most people who are not legislators have their doubts), and thus are influenced the same way as any other human being. The contact between the adult legislator and the adolescent child (saying thank you, Mr. Legislator for your support, my parents work very hard but we don't have very much money, and even though I had a good record in high school, I could never go to college if it had not been for you) is extremely influential.
- (KHL) ***25 years ago, the gross family income for Act 101 student eligibility was \$5,000 or less for a family with one dependent child, plus \$500 for each additional dependent child. Currently, an adjusted family income of \$18,450 is used; but whereas some think that it is too low, others think it is too high. What are your thoughts on the matter?***
- (KLI) Well, I would be in favor of increasing it because of the way in which costs have skyrocketed. Years ago when my daughter who is now 36 was 16, I went out and paid \$6,500 for a top-of-the-line Chrysler. Today, that wouldn't be a down payment. I think that it is foolish to talk about what used to be; \$5,000 may have been acceptable 25 years ago, but today if you don't have \$40,000 a year for a family of four, you are really hurting. As such, we ought to recognize reality.

- (KHL) ***Financial Aid for our students has not kept pace with the ever rising cost of Higher Education. Can you give us ideas as to how, where and to whom we can go for additional funds?***
- (KLI) I am not sure that I know how to answer that question, but I do believe that additional funding must come from the State because you can never really depend upon "private sources". Private sources are not particularly interested in supporting undergraduates, but they can be helpful temporarily. As for long term basic funding, you will have to look to the State.
- (KHL) ***However, as you know, Pennsylvania is not a strong supporter of education. During the past decades, it has ranked in the mid to the high 40's when compared to other states.***
- (KLI) Yes, that is true. The State has never spent the kind of money which the State Constitution says should be spent on education, and the fault lies with the Governor and with Representatives in the House and Senate. Thus, you will simply have to fight for budget increases on the floor of the House, on the floor of the Senate, and in committees. However, I don't think that your organization **alone** can be effective in increasing the overall support for education in Pennsylvania. Change must be initiated by **several** organizations such as yours. For many years, I have been irritated by the overall lack of support for education, and the fact that no Governor, with the exception of Shapp, has understood the problem and really tried to significantly increase the education budget. Ultimately, all of us will have to do the fighting to make the whole Commonwealth more educationally alert.
- (KHL) ***In 1971, 79% of Act 101 students were African American. Since 1990 the percentage has been approximately 31%. Do you consider this reduction in African American representation to be of any concern?***
- (KLI) I don't really care about percentages as long as we are reaching those kids, white or black, who need this help and ought to get it. I will confess that when I first thought about Act 101, I was thinking about black kids because the income level of black families was (and still is) well below that of white families. I feel now, as I felt then, that black families have to be encouraged even more than white families to take advantage of whatever possible monies are available for additional training for their children. Part of the problem with black families is that they do not believe that they will ever get a fair break, and thus they are not aggressive enough in pursuing opportunities that may be available to them. I think that we have to do more proselytizing in the black community than perhaps we have done, but I am not saying that we ought to reduce the number of white students - we need to involve as many students (white, black, green, grey, and whatever) as possible.
- (KHL) ***In your original vision for Act 101, how did you see the working relationship between the Act 101 Director and the Department of Education? What suggestions would you have for Act 101 Directors?***
- (KLI) I think that you should try to get an in-depth conversation with the Secretary of Education and with key staff in the higher education system as soon as possible and let them know of the impact Act 101 has had. Actually, these are the people that you should shower with data. I believe that if you can get the attention of these people, treat them with respect, and make them understand the importance and historical development of Act 101, and its importance to the students who benefit from Act 101, you will be able to enhance your working relationship with the Department of Education. However, the best way to make the road easier through the education department is through the House of Representatives and through the Senate. If enough people in the Senate and in the House want Act 101 to be treated fairly, the Secretary will do so, no matter who he or she is, because the Governor will demand it.

(KHL) ***In regards to legislators, what role do you see for the Black Caucus?***

(KLI) Without any doubt, the Black Caucus should play an important role in supporting Act 101. If its members can help shoulder the fight which was started by a black man, it would strengthen your position. Unfortunately, David Richardson, one of the strongest members of the Black Caucus is now dead; but there are others who could become equally strong, and thus should be given a chance to become deeply involved with Act 101. In this respect, the Association should try to get members of the Black Caucus to attend the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary at Seven Springs in May. There, you could show them what you are doing as well as point out the dangers of Act 101 funding reduction at a time when the Governor is trying to cut back on everything.

(KHL) ***What are your thoughts on the recently-formed Act 101 Directors' Association? Do you have any suggestions or comments for Act 101 Directors throughout the Commonwealth?***

(KLI) I think that it is a great idea structurally. I never envisioned Act 101 going as far as it has gone, but I am extremely proud of the people who envisioned and have built its structure. If you build a strong structure, it is harder to destroy. Act 101 was safe as long as I was there in the House of Representatives, no matter what my position was - Majority Leader, Speaker, whatever. I was the one who always guarded Act 101, and since everyone knew that, nobody played with it. I'm no longer there and you don't have that sort of guardian, but you have the structure which replaces that personal guardianship. If that structure is coherent, firm, strong and speaks up, you are safe. Thus, I think that it is a good idea to have the structure.

(KHL) ***In closing, what would you say is the greatest accomplishment of the Act 101 Program?***

(KLI) I suppose the obvious thing is that it has won. It has enabled a number of black, white, Asian, and all in between children, to further their education and therefore enhance their contribution to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and other states. Secondly, it certainly has been a bellwether piece of legislation that has been copied by several other states. I am glad to see that it has spread as far as it has, but I think that its circle of influence should be increased. I think that one of the worst things that we can do in our society is to tell all parents that it is up to them to educate their children. In earlier days, that is what we used to say in Pennsylvania as well as in New York, Maryland, and all over the United States. Thus, if your father had enough money to send you to school, you went; and if he didn't, you didn't go to school. I think what we need to say is, if you have the ability to be trained, we will train you. In the long run, it isn't the father or the mother who benefits from the training of the child, it's the whole Commonwealth (all of us included) that benefits. Act 101 has been a step in getting the Commonwealth to look at it that way, and I am very proud to have initiated it. However, regardless of who is Governor or which party is in control, we have got to make Act 101 widely known. It has to become an ICON which cannot be touched.