

**Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel
Collection
(Part of the Damon J. Keith Collection of African American Legal History)**

Papers, 1959-1999

19 linear feet

Accession #1379
OCLC #

The papers of Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel were placed in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs between 1988 and 2004 by Ms. Cockrel and DARE members Ingrid White, Ron Alpern and others, and were opened for research in October of 2004.

Kenneth Vern Cockrel was born November 5, 1938 in Royal Oak Township, a poor, black community just across Detroit's northern border. His parents, Sye and Cynthia Cockrel, died when he was 12 years old and he was raised by relatives in Detroit. After dropping out of school in 1955, he joined the Air Force and was trained as a weapons technician, stationed in Germany. Returning to the United States, he enrolled in a special program for adults without diplomas at Wayne State University in Detroit, earning a B.A. in political science in 1964. Realizing that law would be at the center of the struggle for social and economic justice, he entered Wayne's Law School and earned his J.D. in 1967. While at Wayne State, Cockrel met and married Carol White and fathered a son, Ken Cockrel, Jr.

As the sixties heated up, so did Ken Cockrel's politics, and much of that activism was played out on Wayne's campus, where he became something of a celebrity. While working at the Detroit News to pay his way through school, he met Mike Hamlin and John Watson, who were organizing black auto workers, and with others, they formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1969 as an umbrella organization uniting local Revolutionary Union Movements, like DRUM, and their support groups. In 1971, after political and personal differences forced his resignation from the League and the Black Workers Congress, Cockrel and some Motor City Labor League defectors formed the multi-racial Labor Defense Coalition, which was instrumental in forcing the dismantling of STRESS, the undercover police unit reviled in Detroit's black community.

At the same time, in the late 1960's, Cockrel helped found Philo, Maki, Ravitz, Pitts, Moore, Cockrel & Robb, a law firm which, under various names, provided legal representation for individuals and organizations involved in the struggle against political and economic repression. Over the next ten years, he and his colleagues earned reputations as crusaders for working and poor people by winning a number of high-profile lawsuits that put the establishment on trial—the judiciary and jury selection process in New Bethel, the corporation and assembly line in James Johnson, the police in Hayward Brown and Madeline Fletcher.

By 1977, when he was elected to a seat on the Detroit City Council as an "independent socialist," Ken Cockrel had become the most well-known and influential radical in the city, respected, even by his adversaries, for his intellect, rapid-fire eloquence and passionate commitment to fighting inequity and injustice. But disillusioned at his inability to use his Council position to improve conditions in the city, he decided not to run for re-election in 1981. He returned to the practice of law, ultimately rejoining his friend and former colleague, Justin Ravitz, at Sommers, Schwartz, Silver & Schwartz in 1988, and was considering a run for mayor when he died of a heart attack on April 25, 1989.

Sheila Ann Murphy Cockrel was born on November 3, 1947 and grew up in Detroit's Corktown, the daughter of the founders of the Detroit Catholic Worker movement, Louis and Justine L'Esperance Murphy. She attended Catholic schools in Detroit and Wayne State's Monteith College. From 1966-1968 she worked as staff secretary for the West Central Organization, a grassroots community group in the Saul Alinsky mode, where she first met Ken Cockrel. In the late sixties and early seventies, as a founder of the Ad-Hoc Action Group, the Motor City Labor League and the Labor Defense Coalition, she honed her organizing skills in demonstrations and rallies against police brutality, absentee landlords and Wayne County Jail conditions and in petition campaigns like the one to abolish STRESS. At the same time she helped initiate and maintain a series of city-wide mass educational programs known first as Control, Conflict & Change Bookclub and then as From the Ground Up Bookclub. Perhaps the best tests of Murphy's organizing and administrative skills came in 1972 when she successfully managed Justin Ravitz's campaign for Detroit Recorder's Court judge and again in 1977 with her stewardship of the Cockrel campaign and his Council staff.

In the wake of the Cockrel victory, those who had worked on his election campaign regrouped as the Detroit Alliance for a Rational Economy (DARE), charged with researching issues Cockrel would face as a councilman, like tax abatement and public health, and creating an independent, mass political force that called for strong community control of basic urban institutions. Longtime political allies, Sheila Murphy and Kenneth Cockrel married in 1978; their daughter, Katherine, was born three years before her father died. In 1993 Sheila Cockrel ran successfully for the Detroit City Council and is currently serving her third term.

The Kenneth V. and Sheila M. Cockrel Collection consists of correspondence, reports, government surveillance files, minutes, newspaper clippings and other media coverage, speeches, articles and radio commentaries, legal case records and other material documenting the Cockrels' involvement in progressive social and political causes in Detroit in the 1960's and 1970's as well as Mr. Cockrel's activities as a Detroit City Councilman.

RESEARCHERS USING THIS COLLECTION MUST SIGN A RESTRICTED USE FORM. NO NAMES APPEARING IN DESIGNATED FILES, OTHER THAN THOSE OF KENNETH AND SHEILA COCKREL, MAY BE CITED WITHOUT THE WRITTEN CONSENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL NAMED AND NO UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL IN RESTRICTED FILES MAY BE COPIED.

Important subjects in the collection:

Ad-Hoc Action Group (Detroit, Mich.)
African American automobile industry workers
Black power--Michigan--Detroit
Black Workers Congress
Hayward Brown
Community development, Urban--Michigan--Detroit
Community organization--Michigan--Detroit
Control, Conflict and Change (Detroit, Mich.)
Detroit Alliance for a Rational Economy
Detroit General Hospital
Detroit (Mich.). City Council
Detroit (Mich.). Police Dept.
Detroit (Mich.). Police Dept. S.T.R.E.S.S. Unit
Detroit (Mich.). Recorder's Court
Elections--Michigan--Detroit
Flint (Mich.). Police Department
From the Ground Up (Detroit, Mich.)
Labor Defense Coalition (Detroit, Mich.)
League of Revolutionary Black Workers (Detroit, Mich.)
Motor City Labor League (Detroit, Mich.)
New Bethel Baptist Church (Detroit, Mich.) incident
Poletown (Detroit, Mich.)
Police brutality--Michigan--Detroit
Racism--Michigan--Detroit
Radicalism--Michigan--Detroit
Justin Ravitz
Tax remission--Michigan--Detroit
Wayne County (Mich.). Jail

Important correspondents in the collection:

Ronald Alpern
Julian Bond
Kathryn Bryant
John Conyers, Jr.

Important correspondents (cont'd):

Pierre Dommergues
Jane Fonda
Dan Georgakas
Gregory Hicks
James Ingram
Stephen Lighthill
Daniel Luria
Kevin Murphy
Sheldon Otis
Justin Ravitz
Jordan Rossen
Jack Russell
Derek Shearer
Ingrid White

Related collections:

Detroit Revolutionary Movements
Dan Georgakas
Mel Ravitz

Non-manuscript material:

Some photographs, posters and campaign memorabilia as well as a large number of audio and video tapes of DARE executive board meetings, Ken Cockrel broadcast appearances and speaking engagements and various conferences and organizer training sessions have been placed in the Archives Audiovisual Collection.

Contents

18 storage boxes **1 small flat oversize items**

Series I, Personal Files, 1959-1999, Boxes 1-3:

Correspondence, material related to speaking engagements, media coverage, government surveillance files, interviews with and radio commentaries, newspaper columns and speeches by Ken Cockrel. The Detroit City Council series contains speaking engagement and media coverage files for the period 1977-1981.

Series II, Organizational Files, 1968-1986, Boxes 3-7:

Correspondence, reports, minutes, media coverage, publications, publicity, legal documents, conference and election campaign material relating to the activities of organizations co-founded by the Cockrels. Particularly well documented are the Labor Defense Coalition's campaigns to abolish STRESS and to elect Justin Ravitz to Detroit Recorder's Court. A few files on Ravitz's tenure as judge are also included in this series.

Series III, Detroit Alliance for a Rational Economy, 1978-1982, Boxes 7-11:

Correspondence with allied organizations, minutes, convention and conference materials, media coverage and research reports produced by DARE officers, its task forces and the Detroit Institute for Urban Policy Research. There is a good deal of overlap in the DARE and Council files since, although Cockrel maintained a clear distinction between his role in the organization and his role at the City Council, many DARE principals also staffed his Council office.

Series IV, Detroit City Council, 1977-1983, Boxes 11-15:

Correspondence and staff memoranda, research reports on city problems, especially tax and economic development issues, media coverage and publicity documenting Cockrel's Detroit City Council campaign and tenure.

Series V, Legal Cases, 1972-1988, Boxes 15-17:

Court documents, attorneys' notes and media coverage related primarily to the New Bethel, Hayward Brown and Madeline Fletcher cases.

Series VI, Subject Files, 1968-1980, Box 18:

Literature and media coverage about (primarily) Detroit individuals and organizations involved in social protest in the 1960's and 1970's.

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