

Earl G. Graves Sr., a voice for black entrepreneurs, dies at 85

By Daniel E. Slotnik
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Earl G. Graves Sr., an entrepreneur who fostered success in the African American business community by founding the magazine Black Enterprise and writing the book "How to Succeed in Business Without Being White," died Monday at a care facility in White Plains, New York. He was 85.

His son, Earl G. Graves Jr., Black Enterprise's current chief executive, said the cause was complications of Alzheimer's disease.

Graves created Black Enterprise in 1970 with a \$175,000 loan and the backing of advertisers he courted himself. The magazine was designed to appeal to newly ascendant African American professionals, to encourage young people to become entrepreneurs in their own right, and to make black executives a more recognizable part of American corporate culture.

The idea of targeting the black business commu-

nity was novel, but Graves pitched it with confidence befitting the multimillionaire publisher and businessman he would become.

"I was just another entrepreneur who believed in himself," Graves told The Post-Standard of Syracuse, New York, in 2005. "The only difference was that I was black."

Graves set up a board of powerful African American advisers, including Sen. Edward W. Brooke III of Massachusetts, Rep. Shirley Chisholm of New York and Julian Bond, the civil rights activist and a founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center. To build an audience, he sent free copies of Black Enterprise to black professionals, ministers, politicians and many corporations.

Black Enterprise, which featured profiles of African American businessmen and women, advice on navigating the corporate world for young professionals and an annual list of the most successful black-owned companies, proved popular. In time it became a com-

bination of publications like Forbes, Money and Fortune aimed at African American readers. Earl Graves Jr. said that the magazine's print circulation peaked at around half a million in the early 2000s.

Graves, instantly recognizable in a power suit with suspenders and thick but meticulous sideburns, also ran a successful soft drink franchise with investors including Magic Johnson and served on several corporate boards, including those of Aetna, American Airlines and what was then DaimlerChrysler.

In 1997 Graves published "How to Succeed in Business Without Being White: Straight Talk on Making It in America," which he wrote with Wes Smith. The book, a New York Times bestseller, included concrete lessons on networking, maximizing career opportunities and building wealth gleaned from Graves' lifetime of entrepreneurship. It also emphasized that Graves saw the goal as an equal chance at success

rather than special treatment.

"The white-dominated business world needs to understand that we don't want charity," he wrote. "We want to do business. We don't want guaranteed success. We want the opportunity to earn it."

Earl Gilbert Graves was born in New York City's Brooklyn borough on Jan. 9, 1935, to Earl Graves, an immigrant from Barbados, and Winifred (Sealy) Graves, who was from Trinidad. He grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. His father worked in the garment industry and his mother was a homemaker.

He graduated from Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn, then studied business at what is now Morgan State University, a historically black institution in Baltimore, where he sold flowers, mowed lawns, worked as a security guard and was on the track team.

After graduating, he spent some years in the Army, then returned to Brooklyn, where he worked in law enforce-

ment and real estate. He also volunteered with local government and civic groups, including one dedicated to improving Bedford-Stuyvesant that was founded by Sen. Robert Kennedy.

Graves met Kennedy after organizing a rally for him in Brooklyn in the mid-1960s. Earl Graves Jr. said that Kennedy was so impressed with Graves' organizational acumen that he offered him a job on his staff, which he accepted.

Graves worked for Kennedy until he was assassinated in 1968, after which he returned to Brooklyn. Someone in the Bedford-Stuyvesant group suggested that he start a newsletter to publicize advances in the black business community. The newsletter grew into Black Enterprise.

In 1960 Graves married Barbara Kydd. She died in 2012.

In addition to his son Earl Jr., he is survived by two other sons, John and Michael, two sisters, Joan Jones and Sandra Graves, a

brother, Robert, and eight grandchildren.

In 2006 Graves retired as Black Enterprise's chief executive, though he remained chairman until his death. Black Enterprise is still printed periodically, but Earl Graves Jr. said that the company now focuses more on events, social media and its website, which attracts about 2 million unique visitors a month.

In "How to Succeed in Business," Graves wrote that when he was a student at Morgan State and told acquaintances that he hoped to be a successful businessman, they often reacted with incredulity because "the concept of a black businessman with his own corporation" was "largely a foreign, even a laughable, one to blacks as well as whites."

Times have changed, in part helped by Graves' efforts, and his alma mater now trains new generations of African American entrepreneurs at the Earl G. Graves School of Business and Management.