

Steve Reece...more than a businessman

by Cincinnati Herald August 28, 2017



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Steve Reece when he received his doctorate degree from Temple Bible College in Cincinnati. At left is the late Carl Lindner Jr., and at right in the late Rev. Dr. Calvin Harper, one of the founders of the college. Photo provided

By Dan Yount

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The Cincinnati Herald

Cincinnati trailblazing businessman, civic leader, promoter, and father Steve Reece is 70 years old on Tuesday, September 12, 2017, and the community is celebrating his birthday with him from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. that same day in a party at Duke Energy Convention Center, 525 Elm Street. The public is invited to attend this free event and enjoy a special tribute to Reece, light bites, a birthday cake cutting, and dancing.

In talking about his extended involvement in the community that began when he was still in high school, Reece said, "I look at it as 70 years of God's grace and 46 years of entrepreneurship and civic empowerment throughout the country," Reece said.

Reece graduated from Withrow High School in 1965, having been a starter on the Men's Basketball Team from the seventh through the twelfth grade, with the team losing only six games – yes, six – over that span of time. In several of those 3 years, the Tigers were undefeated, and ranked in the high school polls as number 4 in Ohio.

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Steve Reece was a starting senior guard on the Withrow Basketball Team in 1965. He was inducted into the Withrow Athletic Hall of Fame in 1989. Photo provided

During his studies at Withrow, he said his goal was to be an entrepreneur and business owner, which he chose as a career. At the time, many of the colleges and universities did not offer studies in entrepreneurship.

“So, I started out on my own to attend college and pursue my goals and ambitions as an entrepreneur,” Reece said. “My mother allowed me to put a file cabinet, desk, telephone, and typewriter in a corner in her basement. I then started out as an independent music concert promoter, promoting jazz and pop concerts throughout Greater Cincinnati. My efforts in this area were recognized by *DownBeat* magazine, which was the bible of the jazz music industry, as one of the upcoming promoters.”

Reece then attended Xavier University studying communication arts, and after two years, he was recruited by Ralph Lazarus, chair of the Board of Federated Department Stores, to attend Lazarus’ alma mater, which was Amos Tuck University at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire for outstanding entrepreneurship prospects. He graduated from the school in the 1980s, having attended classes with former NBA star David Bing and Magic Johnson.

Meanwhile, Reece developed a local program following the 1968 riots in Cincinnati that became one of his signature programs, known as Operation Step Up, which was targeted at inner city youth who have musical talents that he wanted to expose to the community. Operation Step Up was endorsed and supported by former Mayor Eugene Ruehlmann and funded by J. Corbitt Foundation. The program was highly successful involving more than 1,500 young people with performances in the West End, Avondale, and Evanston. A surprise event at Eden Park on a Sunday drew 5,000 people, and the late James Brown made a personal appearance. The program was recognized by former Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

Rev. Jesse Jackson, at left, congratulates Steve Reece when Reece was elected Grandmaster of Prince Hall Masons in 1993. Photo provided

Out of Operation Step Up, Reece started an independent recording label known as S.R. Records and recorded in 1969 an album called *Barbara Howard on the Rise*, featuring his future wife singing several selections he wrote that are still being played all over the world. He contracted with major record companies trying to get several young people recording contracts, which was his first venture into business. He had by now moved out of his mother’s basement, with an office at 515 Melish Avenue, now Martin Luther King Boulevard.

“I got deeply involved in music promotions, and worked with former DJ Dusty Rhodes, now Hamilton County auditor, in bringing the Beatles to Cincinnati, and with other promoters in bringing Aretha Franklin, The Fifth Dimension, The Temptations, and The Supremes to Cincinnati Gardens.

“This put me in contact with George Wein, the founder of the Jazz Festival, who then put me in contact with Dino Santangelo, the local Jazz Festival promoter. I traveled with him to Hampton, Virginia, Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles in putting on festivals. I met his brother Joe Santangelo, who is still doing the festivals in Cincinnati.”

Meanwhile, Reece met the late Ted Berry, who became Cincinnati’s first Black mayor. Berry named Reece his chief of staff when he became mayor in 1972, making him the youngest African American to become a chief of staff in Cincinnati at age of 27.

“Having learned a lot about how the city government works under Mayor Berry, when he in September 1975 said he was not going to run for re-election, I ran for City Council, receiving 35,516 votes and missed the top nine by 6,000 votes.

“After that race, I wanted to get back into business, and founded Communiplex on January 2, 1976, at my office at 35 East Seventh Street, which was an advertising, marketing and promotions company.”

Through Communiplex, Reece organized, founded and serviced a lot of historic projects, such as promoting the first two professional fights in Cincinnati at the Convention Center. The first fight was Nov. 12, 1976, which was also Cincinnati boxer and later World Junior Welterweight Champion Aaron Pryor’s first professional fight.

Under Communiplex, Reece helped develop a marketing strategy for Warner Cable to help them win a \$50 million cable franchise with the City.

“We also assisted in the development and were a founding member of the first African American Chamber of Commerce in Cincinnati 20 years ago,” he said.

Communiplex organized the first women’s national sports event in the U.S. called Communiplex National Women’s Sports Hall of Fame. The inductees included people like tennis stars Wilma Rudolph and Althea Gibson; Pat Head Summit at University of Tennessee; Cheryl Miller, basketball star at University of Southern California; and Olympian track star Jackie Joyner-Kersey. A number of people came to Cincinnati for the first induction ceremony, and other athletes were added through the years.

Communiplex cable cast 12 home basketball games for Central State University, and 12 University of Cincinnati's women's basketball home games. The company sponsored the Communiplex Red and Blue Women's Basketball Team in the National AAU Basketball Championships. It produced the first Black college basketball classic at Cincinnati Gardens, featuring teams from Central State, Wilberforce, Lincoln University, and Kentucky State in 1983, which was won by Kentucky State.

Communiplex also money fort new uniforms to the Taft High School Football Team after the team's uniforms were stolen, and it organized and sponsored high school and college basketball classes.

With Star Bank as a partner, Reece's company helped create the Communiplex Bank Loan-a-thon at Reece's complex at Integrity Hall in Bond Hill, and the event generated \$7.6 million in one day in loan requests, which set a record for the bank.

Reece helped promote the movie *Muhammad Ali, The Greatest* and the movie with Diane Carole called *Claudine*.

Steve Reece when he was chief of staff for Mayor Ted Berry. Photo provided

He has served as on the national Board for the Dr. MLK Bread Basket Program, as well as Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Push Board.

He has supported many local causes such as the Black Bus Driver protest for jobs and benefits, was chair of the Committee of 50 in the 1980s, which was a powerful Black group that advocated for economic and political improvements in the city.

The business also assisted in the passage of several school levies, helped in political campaigns for several successful candidates, and organized a teleconference at Cincinnati Public Schools during which students could have a conversation with Rev. Jesse Jackson and Cheryl Miller.

The first statewide national tourism advertising campaign featuring actress Jayne Kennedy called The Heart of It All was organized by Reece's company. He also produced a half-hour radio show for WCIN and WDBZ for more than 20 years.

Communiplex played a role in Jesse Jacksons run for president in 1984 and 1988, with Reece traveling the country with Jackson during his campaigns. And he was active in designing and promoting several get-out-the-vote African American events here.

Communiplex presently represents Duke Energy Center in promoting and booking African American events there.

Reece has promoted and produced events for major companies, such as GE and Federated Department Stores, putting together a national minority business purchasing program.

In 1988, Reece and his family decided to purchase an empty photographic warehouse building on Seymour Avenue in Bond Hill and redevelop it into a mixed-use building known as Integrity Hall designed to allow minority business to locate there, to give minority contractors opportunities, and to provide first-class service to the community. The building, before it was sold in 2015, had a 300-seat banquet center, with more than 2,000 events hosted there over the years. The facility also had a beauty shop, day care center, offices, and apartments. National leaders from throughout the country attended events there.

Reece's political activities also included a run in the special Congressional Primary in the 1st District in 1992; a run to become the first Black candidate for chair of the Ohio Democratic Party, finishing in the top three; and serving as consultant to his daughter, Alicia Reece's, successful City Council and state representative races. Many candidates have sought advice from him, and Integrity Hall provided campaign headquarter space for candidates.

In passing down his life experiences, Reece was an adjunct professor for 25 years at UC's Evening College, teaching courses in Blacks in politics and entrepreneurship.

As a member of New Friendship Baptist Church, he has served as chair of the Board of Trustees, deacon, assistant superintendent of Sunday School, a teacher in the Christian Sunday School Congress, and he has a doctorate degree from Temple Bible College in Cincinnati that recognizes his contributions to Christian education.

"One of my goals was to be a good father, and I am most proud of being a good father to my three children, Alicia, Steven Jr., and Tiffany, all of Cincinnati," he said. "All three graduated from college. I was married to the late Barbara Howard Reece for 38 years. I have now been married to Michelle Reece for eight years, and she has a son Darian.

Steve Reece as a Prince Hall Shriner. Photo provided

Reece has been very active in the Masons, serving as Past Master of Gothic Lodge 122; Sovereign Grand Inspector General 33rd Degree King Solomon Consistory; Past Most Worshipful Grandmaster of The Jurisdiction of Ohio Prince Hall Free and Accepted Masons from 1993-95; Past Patron Gothic Chapter 99; Past Joshua Prince White Court No. 1; Past Illustrious Honorary Potentate Sinai Temple

No.59; and Past Honorary Imperial Potentate of Prince Hall Shriners. He has served as Imperial Promotion Director for national Shrine Conventions since 1987 throughout the country. He was chair of the local 2011 and 2015 Shrine Conventions in Cincinnati.

From a historical perspective, Reece, along with the late brother Shriner Carl Lindner Jr., organized the Black and White Masons to engage for the first time in fraternal recognition and visitation in Ohio. In accomplishing that, the auditorium at Temple Bible College was named Reece Lindner Auditorium.

“During my career, I have continually hired a lot of minority contractors, used a lot of African American businesses and employees, and given a lot of young people a chance to be around me as I worked my way through various projects,” Reece said. “I have a strong belief in God, family, and in empowering my community. We must take our gifts from God and use them to the max. I have tried to pass down as much wisdom as I could.

“When started on that journey, I had \$150 in my pocket and that desk in my mother’s basement. When I graduated from high school and college, my father could only give me the want ads in the newspaper. He was employed at the Post Office, and he just did not have anything to pass down to me.”

Reece is still in business doing consulting work under the name of Reece/Communiplex.

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