



The gala held at the Peabody was designed as a tribute to 50 Memphis-area African-American men.

Tri-State Defender breaks ground with first Men of Excellence salute

The first edition of the Tri-State Defender is dated Nov. 3, 1951. It came off the presses under the guidance of a man of excellence – Lewis O. Swingler, publisher and editor.

Executive Editor Karanja A. Ajanaku harkened back to that start in welcoming a sellout crowd to the newspaper’s inaugural Men of Excellence gala held in the Skyway at the Peabody Hotel last Friday (Nov. 20.)

[View a Men-of-Excellence photo gallery and video.](#)

“In some form or fashion, the newspaper has been honoring men of excellence. But we have never done it quite in this fashion. So this is a historical moment and you are part of history,” Ajanaku told the crowd on hand for the gala designed as a tribute to 50 Memphis-area African-American men.

A reader-driven committee selected the honorees. Collectively, the group was a powerful body of energy, Ajanaku said, with impressive support systems that turned out for the event.

“We want to tap into to that,” he said.

General Manager Phyllis Fickling said the newspaper was committed to providing the support necessary for the inaugural Men of Excellence group to coalesce and become a force in the community addressing myriad problems and opportunities.

Eric Robertson, chief administrative officer for the Center City Commission, spoke on behalf of the honorees, acknowledging their gratitude to the newspaper. None of the men could do what they do in the community without the support of family and friends who create the opportunities, he said.

Radio personality Michael Adrian Davis of 95.7 Hallelujah FM was the MC for the gala. He sprinkled humor with life-lessons throughout the evening. The Coalition of 100 Black Women served as hostesses, with entertainment provided by saxman and deejay Gabriel Kenyatta. Rev. Dr. Lawrence Ragland, an honoree from Paris, Tenn., gave the invocation.

A highlight of the evening was the spoken-word performance by actress Flo Roach. Her poem detailed

the journey made by countless African American men of excellence. It is presented as part of the special section in this week's Tri-State Defender.



Actress Flo Roach recites her poem "Men of Excellence." (Photo by Morgan Mukarram)

MEN OF EXCELLENCE

by Flo Roach

You are men – men of excellence
 Men born to serve God and mankind
 Men who were destined to be excellent from the beginning of time
 Men of African descent and many African nations
 Men baked in the sun reflecting many hues and colorations
 You are men – men of excellence

You are men – men of excellence
 Men whose ancestors survived the middle passage, slavery, civil rights
 Men whose ancestors look down on you and are proud of you tonight
 Men who stand on the shoulders of other great men
 Great Men who told you, "son, if you don't give up, you can win"
 You are men – men of excellence

You are men – men of excellence
 Men we watched play high school and college ball and run track
 Men who struggled in the classroom and men who were brainiest
 Men we once knew as Pookie, Mane, Jun Bug and Bubba Head
 Men we now call you doctor, Pastor, Judge, and author of a book that's best read
 You are men – men of excellence

You are men – men of excellence
 Men who escaped the pitfalls of your neighborhood and made it
 Men who wanted to give up, but over came it
 Men who worked one, two, and three jobs to make ends meet
 Men who were knocked down, but kept getting back up on their feet
 You are men – men of excellence

You are men – men of excellence
 Men who fought in wars, and served in Viet Nam, and Desert Storm
 Men who fought the wars of our nation right here at home

Men who marched with MLK and for our rights took a stand
Men who got tired of being disrespected and said – I AM A MAN
You are men – men of excellence

You are men – men of excellence
Other men get more recognition than you
So thank you Tri-State, you knew just what to do
Tri-State is giving you this honor and also making this bid
Because millions of brothers didn't make it, but you were some of the ones who did
Because you are men - men of excellence

(Stand with me sisters)
Men – men of excellence
Keep on being role models for our sons who are black
You are the men we want them to emulate and that's a fact
We love you, honor you, and of this fact we are convinced
You are MEN – MEN OF EXCELLENCE!

(Actress Flo Roach is a Tri-State Defender 2009 Women of Excellence award recipient.)