

The 41st Annual Tuskegee Fly-In

by James Clingman

The Negro Airmen International (NAI), the nation's oldest African American pilots' organization and direct descendent of the legendary Tuskegee Airmen, will hold its annual "Fly-In" in two notable and historic cities this year: Selma and Tuskegee, Ala. The theme for this year's event is "Making an Economic Impact."

Sam L. Jones of Savannah, Ga., president of NAI, shared the significance of this year's Fly-In: "We are starting our event in Selma; Black pilots will land their planes at the Selma Airport and engage the public, especially the young people, in an educational forum regarding the history of flight among African Americans. Trips to the Civil Rights and Slavery museums will be conducted afterward. Then we will make our way to Tuskegee, over the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge via Shorter, Alabama, where we will have an old-time fish fry. And then, on to Tuskegee."

It's going to be a fantastic event, and everyone is invited. The Black Motorcyclists will be there; the National Black Programmers Coalition will be there; the Biofuels Racing Alliance (BFRA) will be there; the Black Farmers will be there; the Nationalist Black Leadership Coalition (NBLC) will be there; and many other local and national celebrities will attend.

Two very special guests will also share the podium in Tuskegee: Mayor Johnny Ford and Fred Gray, author of "Bus Ride to Justice, Changing the System by the System." Gray, who still resides in Tuskegee, is the famous civil rights attorney who fought and won cases for Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the desegregation of Alabama schools, and the 1965 Selma March. Held on what I have called the "hallowed" grounds of Tuskegee University, this four-day event will engage the attendees in an economic impact strategy for the benefit of Alabama's famous "Black Belt." The conference will also do what many just talk about: Bring together various groups and individuals to create a synergy that stresses the principles of collective work and cooperative economics, and how to leverage that synergy into progressive action.

The Fly-In continues a tradition that has come to be the largest gathering of African American pilots in the nation. The weekend became popular as many Black pilots and enthusiasts returned to Tuskegee to visit the "Chief," Charles Alfred Anderson, who passed away in 1996. Anderson trained more than 1,000 pilots at the famous Moton Field

in Tuskegee, including Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr. and Gen. Daniel “Chappie” James. Anderson was responsible for the success of the highly regarded 332nd Fighter Group, formed entirely of Tuskegee pilots. It was one of the most successful fighter groups during World War II and the only fighter group never to have lost a bomber to enemy fighters while flying as escort. That kind of feat required strict discipline and superb flying, both of which “Chief” instilled in his men.

The Fly-in commemorates the legacy of “Chief” Anderson and for the past 41 years has grown both in numbers and initiatives that have a positive impact on the Tuskegee region. Leaders of the NAI, along with those of other organizations, realize the importance of doing what “Chief” did. They teach others, and they work hard to provide economic opportunities to those residing in the “Black Belt” by collaborating with local businesses to assure they get the maximum benefit from the Fly-In being held there each year.

This year’s event stresses Black people supporting Black businesses; it will also conduct forums with Black farmers on how they can gain access to additional markets and maximize their resources and expertise in the agriculture industry. Additionally, the Fly-In will explore opportunities in the energy industry which, with skyrocketing prices, is a business area in which Black people must carve out a significant niche.

“Blackonomics” will also be in the house during the Fly-In. Yours truly will be the keynote speaker for the Awards Banquet on May 25. Our theme is “Making an Economic Impact.” Certainly there is a tremendous need for Black people, wherever we are and whatever we are doing, to seek ways to help ourselves economically via collective strategies and alliances. The huge amount of money we spend to travel, attending conventions and entertainment events, is embarrassingly high compared to the amount we earn from those activities.

For instance, as I noted in my very first book on economic empowerment, Tuskegee should be one of the places in this country that all Black folks should visit. Steeped in history and the spirit of economic independence, it is a city that by now should have been built up to receive millions of visitors annually. Tuskegee University should be one the most endowed Black colleges in the country, not simply by those who attended the school, but by Black people in general.

And, like the fine example of the NAI, other Black organizations should make every effort to hold their conventions there. I know it’s small and cannot handle many of our large events; but smaller meetings could be held there, which over time would create more development and larger venues for more visitors and more business opportunities in this historic city.

How can we celebrate the Tuskegee Airmen all across this country — as well as the accomplishments of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Charles “Chief” Anderson, R.R. Moton, Ben Davis, Chappie James, and others — and yet be so reticent about supporting and continuing to build on their legacy? As we invoke their names, we should also invoke the spirit of their work and their dedication to empowerment. Go to www.blackwings.com for more information on the Fly-In. See you there!