

# The Unpublished Memoir of an Indianapolis Community Leader

JOSEPH SKVARENINA

As a participant in Indiana's County Historian program, I have spent a significant amount of time delving into the lives of individuals who have contributed to the history of my home base, Hancock County. One who particularly interested me was George Knox, the son of a Cree Indian woman and a black Baptist preacher, who in 1863 led a party of slaves into the Union lines near Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Knox eventually joined the 57th Indiana Infantry as a cook, servant, messenger, and, later, mule driver. In 1864 he migrated to Greenfield—where many veterans of the 57th Indiana already resided—and opened a barber shop in the Gooding block. By the 1890s, we find Knox in Indianapolis as the owner of several barbershops, including the exclusive establishments at the Bates and Dennison Hotels. In 1892, he purchased the city's weekly black newspaper, *The Freeman*; two decades later he continued his influential leadership of the local African American community as one of the founders of the racially segregated Senate Avenue YMCA.<sup>1</sup> In 1916, Knox and his fellow community leaders recruited Faburn E. DeFrantz—the branch's physical director since 1913—for the post of executive sec-

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<sup>1</sup>For Knox's life story, see Willard B. Gatewood Jr., ed., *Slave and Freeman: The Autobiography of George L. Knox* (Lexington, Ky., 1979).

retary of this crucial institution. It was a job that DeFrantz would hold for the next 35 years.

In 2002 I was a newly minted commissioned teacher in the Lutheran Church and a member of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran, a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, metropolitan congregation established in 1942 at Fall Creek and Capitol Avenue in Indianapolis. The DeFrantz family attended this church; Faburn's daughter-in-law, Flora DeFrantz, often sat behind me on Sunday. After discussing with me my interest in Knox and the early history of the Senate Avenue Y, Flora presented me with her father-in-law's unpublished memoir—a manuscript that I believe Faburn DeFrantz intended to turn into a book. As I read through this fascinating document, I saw that it provided a firsthand look at his leadership style in the city's black community.

Faburn DeFrantz never hesitated to involve himself with issues that extended beyond the scope of the YMCA. Under his direction, the Senate Avenue branch investigated cases of employment bias, inadequate health and hospital care for minorities, and workplace injustices. It was DeFrantz's leadership, too, that led to the branch's famous Monster Meetings, which brought to Indianapolis the best and the brightest speakers (both black and white) in the fields of art, music, education, religion, science, and politics. (Flora remembers the Epilogue Assemblies that followed these meetings, when speakers and select audience members would cram into the DeFrantz family's living and dining rooms to discuss the issues raised in the evening's program.) Finally, DeFrantz used his post at Senate Avenue as a podium from which to work tirelessly for desegregation—in the city's schools, in the Indiana High School Athletic Association, in campus facilities at Purdue and Indiana University.

DeFrantz was known as the "Chief" during his long tenure at the Senate Avenue branch; his membership slogan was "Indianapolis Must Lead." Under his guidance, the Senate Avenue Y increased its membership from 350 to 5000, becoming one of the city's largest social service organizations and developing a national reputation for its pioneering work. As his autobiography makes clear, DeFrantz wanted Senate Avenue to be a place where every man felt valued. He dedicated the institution to serving the needs of his community and addressing the urgencies of the times in which he lived.

DeFrantz built on the legacy of men like George Knox and the founding fathers of the Senate Avenue YMCA to further define the social agenda of Indianapolis's black community and to expand quality educa-

tion, health care, equal housing, and employment opportunities for African Americans. As civil rights pioneers, both men worked tirelessly to set the stage for desegregation and the multiracial and multiethnic community of the twenty-first century. Today, the work of Knox and DeFrantz is being carried on by the Indianapolis Urban League, Martin University, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the Center for Leadership Development, and many other local social organizations and churches. As DeFrantz indicated, “Indianapolis Must Lead.”

