

# No challenge too great

By William C. Kashatus

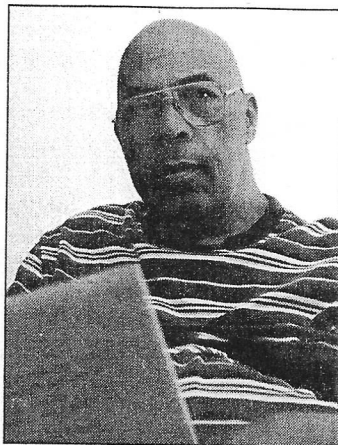
**J**im McGowan had mixed emotions about Black History Month. "It's wonderful to remember the important contributions African Americans made to the United States," he'd say, "but by limiting the lessons to one month, we marginalize those contributions and remove blacks from the larger narrative of American history, where they belong year-round."

McGowan, who died in 2008 at age 76, was a historian by passion and a Renaissance man by trade. Although most people wouldn't rank him among this country's African American heroes, he was a role model for people of all races.

For me, Jim not only kept African Americans in the larger narrative of U.S. history through his writing and lectures, but he also made some fairly impressive history himself.

Born in Brooklyn in 1932, McGowan was the son of a former Negro Leaguer who cultivated his love for baseball. When Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, the 15-year-old set his sights on a major-league career. Over the next few years, McGowan distinguished himself as a hard-hitting first baseman. At 18, he played semipro ball, performing so well the Dodgers offered him a contract.

On the verge of realizing his dream, Jim found himself in the middle of a gang war. Trying to make peace, he was stabbed in the lower abdomen and paralyzed from the waist down. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he turned to music. Touring with Chuck Berry, McGowan played backup guitar, helping to transform rhythm and blues into rock-and-roll. He later became the lead



Jim McGowan in 2003.

RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

singer of the Four Fellows, whose "Soldier Boy" was high on the R&B charts in 1955.

After his singing career ended, Jim moved to Philadelphia, where he enrolled at Temple University and organized a wheelchair basketball league. In 1981, McGowan began a career as an advocate for the disabled. He organized and participated in the world's first all-disabled rowing regatta on the Schuylkill. The following year, he made the first of 20 skydives, including the first night skydive by a paraplegic.

At age 54, Jim attempted to swim the English Channel. He didn't make it, but had no regrets about his Sept. 27, 1986, bid. "The only failure would have been the failure of not trying," he insisted at the time. "Besides, I know that there's other paraplegics who'll hopefully be inspired by my effort."

Impressed by McGowan's determination, Gov. Richard Thornburgh tapped him to head the Committee for the Disabled of the Pennsylvania Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. Jim was responsible for improving access at the King of Prussia Mall, Valley Forge National Historical

Park, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and Temple's Ambler campus, where he became assistant director of disabled services in 1987.

Jim was a gifted historian and speaker. I'd often transport him to speaking engagements in my Toyota van, using a makeshift ramp for him to enter and exit the vehicle. Initially, we had difficulty with the maneuver, but Jim took it with a sharp wit.

Once, his wheelchair got caught in the door and it took nearly 30 minutes to resolve the problem. After I finally got him on solid ground, Jim, who was going to speak on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that day, bellowed: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!"

McGowan was routinely consulted by scholars researching slavery and abolitionism. His 1977 biography of Thomas Garrett, a Quaker Underground Railroad station master, detailed the critical role that runaways and free blacks played on the clandestine route to freedom and was a precedent-setting work in the field.

At the time of his death, we were working on a biography of Philadelphian William Still, a free black abolitionist and director of the Underground Railroad's eastern line.

Jim McGowan's example reminds us that life is full of obstacles. What's important is how we meet the challenges that confront us. That Jim faced his own challenges with dignity, perseverance, and optimism is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

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