

BERNARD KINSEY

Caretaker Of A Proud Heritage

By GLENN R. SWIFT

Photography By JASON NUTTLE

WHEN BERNARD KINSEY shows up at one of Palm Beach County's leading cultural institutions, he gets the red carpet treatment.

It wasn't always that way.

As a young African-American boy growing up in the 1940s and 50s in West Palm Beach, Kinsey was subjected to a constant barrage of racially based injustices all too common in the American South at that time. Back then, most restaurants, hotels, museums and even schools were simply off limits to people of color. Despite these significant obstacles, Kinsey was determined to make it big and to use his fortune to give back to his community.

Sometimes, dreams do come true.

Today, Kinsey, 64, is a nationally renowned Los Angeles-based philanthropist who, along with his wife Shirley, owns one of the largest collections of African-American art in the country. A remarkably successful businessman, he has raised hundreds of millions of dollars to rebuild Los Angeles' notorious inner-city and served as an economic advisor to the governments of South Africa, Germany, Israel, the United Kingdom and France. A self-made man, Kinsey is the first to give credit to others for what he has been able to accomplish.

"My life is a tribute to my mother and father," Kinsey says. "They taught me that education and hard work were the foundation for being successful. They also instilled in me the desire to reach out to others."

The son of the late U.B. Kinsey, the first black principal in Palm Beach County and for whom the U.B. Kinsey/Palmview Elementary School of the Arts in West Palm is named, Kinsey speaks fondly of his childhood and his family's legacy.

"When I was growing up, black teachers in Palm Beach County received half the salary of white teachers. My father was able to level the playing field. Then again, Dad always had community and political leaders over to the house to talk about ways to help the community. Largely as a result of his efforts, many of the roads and sidewalks in West Palm Beach were paved."

Kinsey also mentioned another one of his father's notable accomplishments.

"Back in 1941, Dad sued the Palm Beach County School District to see to it that black kids went to school from September to June just like the white kids, instead of from June to December. He won. Of course he had a pretty good attorney working for him – Thurgood Marshall."

Kinsey gave credit to his mother for teaching him how to handle money responsibly.

"Mom could make a dollar stretch better than anyone I've ever known. There were five of us [children] altogether, and all of us went to college on a teacher's salary, four at the same time."

Recounting Kinsey's business career sounds like a storybook rendition of the American Dream. After graduating from Florida A&M, Kinsey got his first job with the post office in Washington D.C.

"I left Tallahassee with \$26 in my pocket, but with my first job

saved up enough money to buy an engagement ring."

Kinsey describes his marriage to his college sweetheart as a "40-year partnership."

"We do everything together, and from the very beginning we agreed to live off of one salary and save the rest. For the first 15 years of our marriage we did just that, never spent a raise or a bonus."

After his stint as a letter carrier, Kinsey accepted a position as a park ranger at the Grand Canyon. Ironically, it was in the Arizona desert where the multimillionaire-to-be learned more about how to be successful.

"I learned everything I could about the Grand Canyon – the history, flora, fauna, geology, absolutely everything. But more importantly I learned how to be a strong person in a hostile environment. You see, I was the only African-American working there, and my supervisor was very prejudiced."

After the Grand Canyon experience, Kinsey landed a job with Humble Oil (then a part of Exxon) in Los Angeles in 1967. "It was challenging. After all, this was two years after [the riots in] Watts."

Challenging or not, Kinsey became Humble's number one salesman in the country in just 18 months. Four years later, Kinsey joined Xerox, where he also became the company's number one man. This time it took him just nine months.

As for his "trade secrets," Kinsey had this to say.

"I've always been very serious and very purposeful in everything I've ever done. I wanted to make my mark count. I've also always had the ability to put together bits and pieces of disparate information... to see around corners. But the most important thing is to have high self-esteem and the ability to articulate coherently. Typically, you only get one chance to impress someone, that's the first time you meet them."

Kinsey's extraordinary achievements in business have enabled the happy couple to travel to more than 90 countries and to amass an amazing collection of African-American art, sculpture, literature, historical documents and artifacts. The collection vividly personifies the Kinseys' desire to trace their heritage and to show that African-Americans have played an essential role in the development of this country from the very beginning.

"You can trace a people's history by their art, and all of the pieces are part of telling a story of how the African American people became who they are. Much of this story is just now being told, and lots of things have been left out. We want to patch the holes of our history."

"In the Hands of African American Collectors: The Personal Treasures of Bernard and Shirley Kinsey" will be on display from April 19 to July 20 at the Norton Museum of Art at 1451 S. Olive Ave. in West Palm Beach. The collection includes more than 90 objects, from slave owner's documents to works of art by legendary African American artists such as Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett and Sam Gilliam. For more information, call 561.832.5196 or go to www.norton.org.

