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Boston Playing Host To More Minority Conventions As City Works To Change Its Image

by Russell Contreras Associated Press

For years, Dan Corria had been telling colleagues, friends, family - anyone who would listen - that Boston was no longer the place of the violent busing and race riots of the 1970s.

Corria, an architect with the U.S. General Service Administration who grew up in Rhode Island, wanted skeptics from other parts in the country to know that Boston was now an international, largely minority city. His goal was to see Boston host a convention by the group, Blacks in Government, an organization he belongs to that represents blacks working in federal and state governments.

Now, Blacks in Government, or BIG, is scheduled to hold its convention at the city's Hynes Convention Center from Aug. 22 to 25. And it's not the only organization representing minorities coming to town.

Boston is becoming a regular host to national conventions of minority groups as officials work to change the image of a city still tarnished decades later by the 1970s busing riots and perceptions the city is hostile to minorities.

In addition to BIG's convention, this summer Boston will also host the annual gathering of the National Urban League at the Boston Convention Center from July 25 to 31. And last month, Wheelock College hosted a "Race Amity Conference" that drew national speakers including former ABC news anchor Carole Simpson and Harvard Law professor Charles Ogletree.

William "Smitty" Smith, who organized the Wheelock event, said the conferences show the city is now more welcoming to minorities.

"This is not the same place where people threw rocks at school buses," Smith said. "Boston has changed, and as more people visit, they'll see it."

For many blacks and Latinos around the country, Boston was the city where white activists protesting a court-ordered plan that took children from segregated neighborhoods and bused them to others beat Ted Landsmark, a black businessman. Landsman was photographed during what appeared to be a beating by a white teen holding an American flag.

Many also remember Boston as a city that mistreated Boston Celtic Bill Russell, who called the city a "flea market of racism," and as a city where its baseball team, the Boston [Red Sox \[team stats\]](#), was the last to integrate.

Patrick Moscaritolo, president and CEO of Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau, said images from the busing riots left a stain on Boston for decades. In addition, he said those who hadn't visited Boston in the last 40 years still thought of Boston as a mainly Irish-American and Italian-American city where residents shun people with differences, not as a city where today around half its residents are minorities.

But after the 2004 Democratic Convention, Moscaritolo said the city began winning bids to host conventions from more minority organizations. Moscaritolo said visitors saw how multicultural Boston had become, transforming once largely white neighborhoods such as South Boston and East Boston

"The delegates who attended that convention went back and told everyone, 'Hey, Boston has changed'," Moscaritolo said. "This is not your grandfather's Boston anymore, not even your father's Boston."

Since then, the city has played host to a number of organizations, including the Asian American Journalists Association.

Carole Copeland Thomas, who moved to Boston in 1981, said she was skeptical of the city as a black woman whose daughter was entering kindergarten. "Yes, there were parts of the city that weren't very welcoming," she remembered.

But over time, Thomas said she saw the city evolve to a place that not only welcomed people of color, but celebrated them.

"This is place that educated Dr. Martin Luther King. This was a stop on the Underground Railroad," she said. "We want to have a chance to share this part of Boston that is also part of its legacy."

Thomas now chairs a multicultural committee with the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau and is in constant contact with minority organizations around the country about possible future conventions. Her next big target: convincing UNITY, the coalition of Latino, Asian American and Native American journalists groups, to come to Boston in 2016.

Corria said the buzz around BIG's convention has started, and organizers are expecting around 3,000 attendees from around the country. Seven Boston hotels are under contract and local BIG members are ready to educate their southern friends about lobster and clam chowder, he said.

"We just have to get more people to come visit," Corria said. "Once they see how the city has changed and realize that this was a place that educated Martin Luther King and (President) Obama, they see that Boston can't be all that bad."

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