



BHC-MSS 0146
Guide to the Papers of Craig Kelly
By Meg Rinn and Elizabeth Van Tuyl

Descriptive Summary

Creator: Kelly, Craig

Title: Papers of Craig Kelly

Dates: 1966-2023, [bulk 1970-1971]

Quantity: 1 document box

Abstract: Largely photocopies of newspaper articles on the Black Panthers in Bridgeport in the early 1970s, including Kelly's involvement, and the Bridgeport Fire and Police Departments. Other documents cover the Young Lords and the L'Ambiance Plaza construction disaster. A South End resource guide and two short films about firefighting in Bridgeport and on 9/11 are also included.

Language: English

Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Biographical History:

[Biographical information provided by Craig Kelly]

Craig Kelly is a lifelong resident of the Bridgeport Community. Born in Harlem, N.Y. he grew up in Father Panic Village. A foster child and single father of three boys, he is a former member of the Black Panther Party. In 1968, Craig received a lottery score of 366 from the U.S. Selective Service System.

Kelly's careers and life in his community have been focused on service. In 1980, addressing the Atlanta Child Murders, Craig established (BAAC) Bridgeport Advocates for Atlanta's children. This group, with the help of WTNH, TV 8 New Haven, raised over five thousand dollars to provide counseling services for the family and children affected by the tragedy. In 1983, he founded the Firebird Society of Bridgeport. The Firebird Society is a branch of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters. In 1985, as president of the Firebirds Society, Kelly contacted ABCD or *Action for Bridgeport Community Development* regarding a smoke detector program for enterprise zone area residents. As a result of this collaboration, (450) four hundred and fifty smoke detectors were installed in people's homes.

On April 23, 1987, while in the capacity as a Bridgeport Firefighter, Craig responded to a building collapse and rescued two people pinned underneath the L'Ambiance Plaza Disaster. His efforts were only partly successful, one of the victims died en route to the hospital. A total of 28

people were killed in the L'Ambiance Plaza Disaster. [See New Haven Register, Saturday, May 2, 1987.]

In 1990, Craig attempted to address the high level of homicides in the City of Bridgeport. He wrote a study on Black on Black Homicides, with the Northeastern University Center for Applied Social Research in Boston, Mass.; out of that study twenty two recommendations were accepted and established as protocol.

In 1999, after the tragic death of Leroy B.J. Brown and his mother, Kelly worked with the victims' family as a counselor, at the request of a family friend and the Boys Club.

In 2001, Craig Kelly was asked by Paul Washington, President of the Vulcan Society of New York (an organization of Black Firefighters) to provide counseling to the mothers of the twelve Black Firefighters who died in September 11, 2001 World Trade Center Disaster. To aid in the healing process, Kelly contacted Lillian Benson and friends and put together a documentary, titled *All Our Sons, Heroes of 911*. This is the only story of the twelve Black fighters who died in the 911 disaster. The story is told by the mothers and narrated by Oscar-nominated and three time award winning actress Alfre Woodard. *All Our Sons* has aired on P.B.S. stations across the country.

In 2003, Kelly asked the Bridgeport City Council to ceremonially name a portion of Broad Street linked to South Frontage Road and University Avenue, "Rufus Baker Memorial Boulevard." Mr. Baker played in the Negro Leagues, the New York Black Yankees and was a member of their All Star Team. The request was granted and thus provided a tribute to a great man.

In 2004, as a collector of African American Slave Memorabilia, Kelly was asked to loan part of his private collection of Slave Artifacts to the Greenwich Historical Society and New York Historical Society. [See: Original Ancestors.com]. This loan was for a program titled: "Intimate Strangers: Slavery in Fairfield County, 1700 to 1850". In 2012 to 2013, celebrating the 150th year of the Emancipation Proclamation, Craig loaned part of his collection of Slave memorabilia to the Fairfield Museum. This "Promise of Freedom" exhibit displayed the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment.

From 2005 to 2006, Kelly provided Mental Health services as a consultant to the Katrina Assistance Project, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. While in New Orleans, Kelly provided help to Fats Domino's family, as well as the New Orleans Police Department, the New Orleans Fire Department, and the citizens of the Gulf Coast.

Kelly is a member of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City (NYPL); and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. (Smithsonian). He has visited nine African Countries and the Island of Cuba. He is also a member of the National African American Memorabilia Collectors Association.

In addition, he has conducted research on slavery in Senegal, Ghana and the Island of Cuba. As a part of the outreach program by the Association of Multi-Cultural Counseling Development, a branch of the American Counseling Association, Kelly has provided counseling to people in Botswana and South Africa. Mr. Kelly holds a Master's in Counseling from the University of Bridgeport and is a License Profession Counselor (L.P.C.). He is an active member of the Association of Multi-Cultural Counseling Development, American Counseling Association. He is a life member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., a member of Mount Aery Baptist church and a Life member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.). In 2004, Kelly retired from the Bridgeport Fire Department. From January 2007-09, Kelly served as the President of the Greater Bridgeport Chapter of the NAACP.

NOTE: Craig Kelly will be interviewed for the BHC's oral history program, Summer 2024-Spring 2025. The interviews will be cataloged as BHC oral histories and kept separate from this collection.

Scope and Content note:

This small collection reflects Kelly's several careers and his interest and involvement in his community. It consists largely of photocopied newspaper articles on the activities of the Bridgeport chapter of the Black Panthers, the Bridgeport Fire Department, and the initiatives to establish a community relations program with the City of Bridgeport Police Department. A small number of documents on Young Lords and Black Panther initiatives and the L'Ambiance Plaza construction disaster are also included. Particularly of note, are the articles on the Panthers as Kelly is featured in several when he was arrested along with Bridgeport Panther leader Lawrence Townsend and fellow panther James Murphy in 1970.

The collection includes a spiral bound publication called South End Resource, a booklet prepared by Kelly in the summer of 1981 the purpose of which was to inform South End residents of Bridgeport about available social services and "to disseminate information about community and city activities." There are two films on DVD, one on black firefighters who were killed during the September 11, 2001 rescue and recovery efforts and one on the Bridgeport Firebirds Society which Kelly helped found.

Arrangement Note:

Due to a lack of original order and Kelly's research interests, the collection has been treated as a series of subject files and arranged in alphabetical order. The collection begins with files on L'Ambiance Plaza, the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, then continues with newspaper articles on the Black Panthers, Bridgeport Fire and Police Departments, and concludes with a booklet on the South End Resources and the two films on fire fighters.

Administrative information:

Provenance: donated by Craig Kelly

Preferred Citation:

Papers of Craig Kelly (BHC-MSS 0146), Bridgeport History Center, Bridgeport Public Library.

Names and Subject Tracings

Personal names

Kelly, Craig
Townshend, Lawrence
Murphy, James
Thompson, Thomas
Koskoff, Michael

Corporate names

Black Panther Party of Connecticut | n 2014081077
Bridgeport Black Panther Party
Koskoff, Koskoff and Bieder
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People | n 80049704

Subject tracings

African American fire fighters | sh85001845
Housing | sh85062603
Housing and health | sh85062623
Fire fighters | sh2002006171
Police-community relations | sh85108786
Detention of persons | sh85037293

Detailed box and folder listing

Box 1

1. L'Ambiance Plaza disaster
2. Black Panther Party platform, October 1966
3. Young Lords Party – Inmate Liberation Front (I.L.F.)
4. Newspaper clippings – Black Panthers, 1970
5. Newspaper clippings – Black Panthers, 1971
6. Newspaper clippings – Black Panther, trials [*Hartford Advocate*, 2023 article]
7. Newspaper clippings – Bridgeport Fire Department
8. Newspaper clippings – Police-community relations
9. Booklet – South End Resource, summer 1981
10. Miscellaneous
11. Film -- Firebird Society, undated
12. Film -- All Our Sons, 2003

Box 2

1. Laminated newspaper clippings – Bridgeport Fire Department
2. Laminated newspaper clippings - Biographical sketches of Craig Kelly; community activities and interests