

Rescuing the Black United Fund.

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NEW YORK CITY: What happened to the Black United Fund of New York? Black leaders, researchers and social advocates have been asking that question of David Paterson, urging the governor to bring back to life the Harlem-based nonprofit philanthropy organization. One of the casualties of the 2002 investigations of then attorney general Eliot Spitzer, the fund was subsequently taken over by the city in 2003. Spitzer vowed to breathe new life to BUFNY, but more than five years have passed, and the organization's headquarters are now occupied by a bar. BUFNY officials say they still don't know why they have not received an official certificate of discontinuance or any legal explanation of why the fund was closed.

One of the 18 chapters of the Newark, N.J.-based National Black United Fund, the BUFNY has contributed more than \$15 million in grants, technical assistance and program services to community-based African-American programs and projects throughout New York State. Although the fund could not be depended upon for major grant support, Woodie King Jr., producing director of the New Federal Theatre, stated that the fund has supported such black theatres as New Heritage Theatre Group, National Black Theatre and H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players. "The fund has assisted New Federal and supported the affordable housing request of our late marketing director, actor/director Wayne Grice," King says.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Larry Barton, BUFNY's former vice president and general manager, added that most of the New York-based arts groups the fund supported "have performed nationally and internationally." Here's a short list: Amistad Theatre Group, Black Spectrum Theatre, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop, Negro Ensemble Company, Soweto Cultural Effort Theatre and Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center. "The specific effect of the destruction of BUFNY," says Barton, "is that an independent funding source within the black community has been cut off, thus adding to the existing burdensome necessity to depend heavily on funding from outside the community. The tremendous potential for a BUFNY to bring greater funding to the arts in the black community was short-circuited." Spitzer's actions, says King Davis, a University of Texas--Austin professor who is studying the fund-raising activities in black communities in the U.S., "have done harm to the fund, its reputation in the community and its ability to raise funds from its natural constituency." Visit www.kermiteady.com.

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