

# Bernard Powell

Civil Rights Activist  
1947-1979

by Kimberly R. Riley

Those who remember Bernard Powell remember him working tirelessly to transform the “ghetto into a goldmine,” while sporting a beret—his favorite accessory.

Bernard Powell, a native Kansas Citian, was born five minutes ahead of his twin brother, Burnele on March 5, 1947. He graduated from Central High School in 1965 and was instrumental in forming the school’s alumni association.

Powell became interested in civil rights work at a young age. He joined the NAACP at age 13 and joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the March to Selma, Alabama. In the mid-1960s, he became regional director of the Congress of Racial Equality.

Many of Kansas City’s urban youth staged protests and riots in response to Dr. King’s assassination. During this era of confusion and disillusionment, Powell and others formed the Social Action Committee of 20 (SAC-20) in October of 1968. SAC-20’s early efforts were aimed at teaching leadership and job training skills to black youth. During this time, Powell began wearing his trademark SAC-20 black beret bearing a five-pointed star, which quickly branded him, in the eyes of some, as a militant.

Powell received many honors, including “Outstanding Man of the Year” by the National Junior Chamber of Commerce and the National Jefferson Award for public service. He was appointed to several state committees, including the Governor’s Advisory Council on Comprehensive Health Planning for Missouri and the Human Resources Corp. He also participated in the Urban League of Kansas City, the Missouri Head Start Council, the Model Cities board of directors and the National Conference of Lawyers.

Powell longed to become Missouri’s first black governor. This goal was cut short, however, when he was shot to death in 1979 at age 32 at Papa Doc’s East Side Social Club at 27<sup>th</sup> and Indiana.



A bronze statue of Powell stands in Spring Valley Park at 28<sup>th</sup> and Brooklyn, across the street from his childhood home.

**Sources**

*The Kansas City Times*, 9 April 1979; 16 April 1979.

*The Kansas City Star*, 17 Aug. 1991.

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