



Staff photo by Graham Cullen

In August, Hayden Duke was named president of the Frederick County chapter of the NAACP, but without an official election and swearing-in ceremony.

Who, if anyone, is leading the local NAACP chapter ?

By NANCY LAVIN | NLAVIN@NEWSPOST.COM

Frederick County's chapter of the NAACP has come under scrutiny after people inside and outside of the longtime civil rights organization say it didn't follow its own rules for choosing a new leader. A key question remains: Who really is the group's new president?

The Frederick County NAACP announced in August that Hayden Duke, a city resident and former Frederick County Human Relations Commission chairman, was taking the reins of the organization. Duke was to replace former President Guy Djoken, who was stepping down after more than a decade because of obligations in his job as executive director for the UNESCO Center for Peace.

Chapter members and outside observers are now questioning whether Duke actually is president.

The organization's bylaws say a leadership change outside the regular cycle requires a special election and needs a vote of at least 50 members. There must also be an official swearing-in ceremony after the election.

People inside and outside the group say that Duke was never elected, and there was no swearing-in ceremony. Furthermore, chapter membership might be less than the requisite 50 people; no one knows how many members the chapter has.

Playing by the rules

Djoken described Duke's appointment as unofficial. Duke was simply stepping in to help revitalize the organization since Djoken's job made him unable to do so.

Gerald Stansbury, president of Maryland's NAACP, also said Duke's role was not an official change in leadership. In an interview Thursday, he said he was aware Duke was never elected

and that an election was required for Djoken to be replaced.

But in an email sent to chapter member Kavonte Duckett in September, Stansbury indicated that Duke's leadership was in an official capacity.

"It is my understanding a special election was held and Hayden was elected by the members present," he wrote to Duckett, who shared the message with *The News-Post*.

Stansbury didn't return phone messages seeking comment about the discrepancy between his written and spoken comments.

Duckett is a community activist involved with a variety of political and volunteer advocacy groups, including the Frederick County Human Relations Commission. He contacted Stansbury after Duke was named president, an announcement Duckett questioned because there was never an election.

Duke acknowledged he was not the official chapter president under the organization's bylaws. He said he didn't realize until about two months after he assumed the position that an elec-

tion was necessary.

Duke chalked up the failure to follow the bylaws to miscommunication. "Everything that was done was done in good faith," he said.

Motive questioned

Duckett, however, said the lack of transparency and protocol in naming Duke president indicated something else.

"From the outside looking in, it just looked like a political move," Duckett said.

Duke, who is white and made an unsuccessful run for Frederick city alderman in 2013, might have tried to secure the city's African-American vote in the next election by becoming chapter president, Duckett said.

Mark Jafari, an Urbana resident who volunteers for several countywide activist groups, also questioned Duke's intentions. Jafari recently became a member of the local NAACP. He distanced himself from the organization previously because of how Duke became the president.

"The whole thing was kind of a sham," Jafari said.

Duke maintained that he sincerely was trying to help the civil rights organization get back on its feet. Regardless of whether his role was official president or an interim administrator, he planned to pass the torch to someone else within a few months.

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Djoken

NAACP

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"I figured I would do it for a month or two or three or four and then be able to hand off an organization with money in the bank and an active membership list, so that when someone else was elected, it would be ready to go," he said.

What has Duke accomplished toward that goal? According to Duckett, not much. No one in the African-American community has heard much of anything from Duke since August, Duckett said.

The Rev. Derek Shackelford, a lifetime Frederick County NAACP member, said he never heard from Duke. Since he was chapter vice president from about 1998 to 2005, Shackelford said, he thought Duke would have contacted him for help or advice as he worked to reinvigorate the group.

Angela Spencer, chairwoman of the Human Relations Commission, said she was in close contact with Duke through their joint service on the commission and immediately after he became NAACP president. She said she hasn't heard from him since October, though.

Starting from scratch

According to Duke, his initial work since taking over the chapter has been largely behind the scenes.

The chapter's East Church Street office, for example, didn't have a working lock. He didn't know the account number, or even the bank that the organization used. The last membership records are from 2007.

Once he found out his appointment may have violated the organization's bylaws, he put his advocacy and outreach efforts on hold.

"Right now, we're putting



12:30-7:30 P.M.
Frederick MD 21703
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it weather



the brakes on things until we can get the members necessary to have a special election," Duke said.

Stansbury said he, Duke, and other community members he would not name have been working diligently to increase the chapter's membership base, so they can move forward with an election. Stansbury would not elaborate on how leaders have been trying to bring in new members.

Duke cited Facebook posts and meetings with various community leaders as part of his attempts to connect with new members. But the last post on the Frederick NAACP Facebook page — declaring a goal to get 50 new members with instructions for how to sign up online — was on Sept. 16.

The NAACP operates through yearly memberships, with a \$30 renewal required each year to be active. A lifetime membership is available for \$750.

Duke said the Frederick chapter has received a few membership renewals and new applications in the last few months, but did not give a specific number.

No one knows exactly how many active members belong to the local chapter right now, apart from Duke's estimate of a dozen lifetime members.

Daniel Valentine, a spokesman for the NAACP's national offices in Baltimore, said the organization does not release chapter-specific membership numbers. Based on memberships reported between Jan. 1 and Oct. 31, the Frederick County chapter's membership has increased 21 percent from the same period in 2014, he said.

A troubled past

Shackelford recalled a once "robust" chapter, with more than 300 members, when he joined the executive committee in the late 1990s. But the group's influential presence has declined significantly since then.

"For a while, you would have thought we didn't have a local NAACP," Duckett said.

Exactly when its voice fell silent depends on who you ask.

Djoken tied the inactivity to a conflict with his UNESCO position a few years ago. The new job forced him to travel frequently, leaving him unable to fulfill his NAACP duties.

But Spencer said the NAACP chapter hasn't been a functioning group for at least a decade. She named two prior presidents, Charlene Edmonds and Denise West, as "true voices of the community."

Both of those women, however, left the organization surrounded by controversy.

West, Djoken's immediate predecessor, was convicted on felony theft charges after she wrote checks to family members from the organization's accounts.

Prior to West, Edmonds faced allegations of criminal wrongdoing and financial mismanagement that led to her resignation. She was cleared of any wrongdoing, but the controversies affected the organization.

The recent violation of bylaws underscores the lack of credibility, Shackelford said.

"Any organization that doesn't follow the bylaws ... is kind of just a rogue organization," he said.

Spencer didn't realize Duke's presidency had been called into question until she talked to a *News-Post* reporter Wednesday. If Duke's appointment violated the rules for changing leadership, she said, she was "disappointed and somewhat embarrassed" for the organization.

Observers say time spent fixing the missteps is taking away from the group's role as an advocate for civil rights issues in the county, state and nation.

Spencer named the recent revelation of racially based harassment in Lake Linganore as an example of the need for a strong NAACP presence.

"We should have been an organization that gentleman can call on," Duckett agreed, referring to a black resident whose white neighbor was posting offensive and harassing signs in his front yard. "It would just be nice to have a presence here."

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