

Secret of activist's sexuality brought to light in death

By JASON MICHAEL

DETROIT — Harold McCormick, 65, was a quiet and conservative man, a pillar of his community. Slain on May 7, McCormick was a civil rights activist who marched alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson and worked with Mayors Coleman Young and Dennis Archer. He was a senior officer and longtime steward at Ebenezer AME Church. And he was gay.

No evidence of McCormick's sexual orientation could be found on his wall of fame. There were no photos of gay rights activists he may have marched with or mementos of Stonewall in his collection. He chose, instead, to keep that part of himself a secret.

"The whole family knew," said nephew Donnel Johnson, "it's just that he was not open about it."

But in death, if not in life, McCormick's life has been brought out of the closet.

Johnson, 26, found his uncle's body on the morning of May 11. McCormick was wearing only his undershorts and a phone cord and double-knotted necktie were still around his neck. Although robbery was initially considered to be motive in the killing, more details soon came to light.

Adult videos found in McCormick's living room led authorities to the Uptown Bookstore in a section of Highland Park known for prostitution.

There it was discovered that McCormick had been videotaped standing next to Willie Arthur Brown, a sturdy man identified as a prostitute, who was also a paroled murderer. Picked up by authorities in Palmer Park, Brown did not confess to the strangling, but quickly admitted that McCormick had paid him \$20 for his services. And suddenly the secret that McCormick had always kept to himself was out.

Praised by his nephew as an

inspiration to many and a "devout Christian," Johnson gave McCormick credit for his own move from Louisiana to Detroit.

"I'm up here because I'm in the auto industry," Johnson said, "and, basically, he was the person who was instrumental in getting me in contact with the people I needed to be in contact with to get my foot into the auto industry."

Johnson also credited his uncle with encouraging him to pursue a master's degree, of which he now has two.

On the subject of McCormick's sexual orientation, however, Johnson said little, worried that the last actions of his uncle's life could tarnish the image McCormick spent a lifetime building.

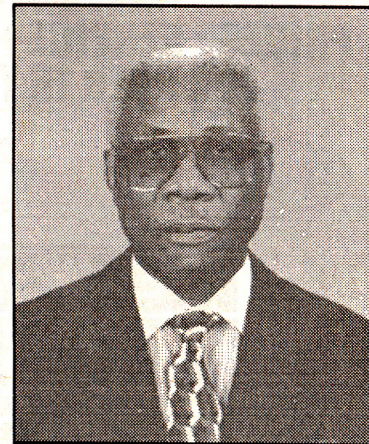
"That's why you haven't seen me on any of these television stations because I didn't want to fuel the flames as it would be, because that's what sells papers and that's

what gets ratings. I feel more comfortable speaking about that he did in the community, or in the church specifically."

A graduate of Grambling State University in Louisiana, McCormick went on to receive his master's from Atlanta University. From there he went on to found the Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Home in Cleveland, as well as several other organizations here in Detroit including Harold House and Quality Human Service.

Pres. Bill Clinton recognized McCormick for extensively researching his family's lineage all the way back to slavery. Since 1990 he served as the organizer of his family's reunions, where he often enlightened several hundred relatives from around the country about the family's ancestral roots.

"You have two kinds of people," says Johnson, "people who will run away from a fire and the other kind, the ones who will



Harold McCormick led a life devoted to civil-rights activism and was an inspiration to many people.

run toward a fire. He was the kind that would run toward a fire to see if anyone needed help."

McCormick will be memorialized by his family at the next McCormick/Carey family reunion scheduled for August in Atlanta.