



Photo courtesy of the Bass Family

Remembering Treva Bell Bass, Detroit Radio Mogul and LGBTQ+ Philanthropist

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Treva Bell Bass, who died November 8, was born into one of the most prominent and well-respected African American families in Detroit.

Bass made her entrance into the world on July 31, 1955, the same year her grandfather, Haley Bell, a dentist and businessman, founded the Bell Broadcasting Company and launched radio station WCHB in Detroit.

Bell and his son-in-law Wendell Cox, also a dentist, were the first African Americans to be granted a broadcasting license in Michigan, and WCHB was the first Black-owned radio station in the country to be built from the ground up. Throughout the 35 years it operated, WCHB and sister station WJZZ significantly influenced African American culture in Detroit.

In other words, Bass was born into a life of great expectation. She was the daughter of a dentist and (for a time) WCHB executive Robert Bass and his wife Dorris, a socialite. Bass was expected to be a prim and proper debutante and come out to society. “Coming out,” in this case, did not mean telling her mother she liked girls.

But Bass handled all the pressure with a certain grace and nonchalance.

“She was unaffected by all that,” said longtime friend Patrick Heron. “She knew where she came from. She didn’t talk about herself or her background. If she got to know you and she trusted you, she would tell you. But she had situations where people took advantage of her.”

After graduating from Cass Technical High School in 1972, Bass moved to Los Angeles for a while and tried becoming an actress. After that, she experimented with a few employment possibilities. Finally, the family business called to her, and she graduated from Specs Howard University before becoming the chief engineer at the radio stations.

“She liked what she did,” Heron said. “She loved the radio stations. She loved being an engineer. But the administrative part she was not fond of. When they had a board meeting, it was a meeting of the family, and those were the days she was stressed out. She’d call me after a board meeting and say, ‘I’m picking up a six-pack, and I’ll be there in 10 minutes.’”

In 1996, Bass and the rest of her family decided to sell the stations to the fledgling Radio One conglomerate for a reported \$34 million. Bass considered herself retired after the stations

were sold. She and her wife and partner of 33 years, June Washington, split their time between their residence here in Bloomfield Hills and their homes on St. Croix and Martha’s Vineyard.

Bass was known for being vivacious, kind and endearing — and for her million-dollar smile.

“What first drew me to her was her love for my children,” Washington said. “She was so kind. I miss everything about her. Our conversations. Our jokes. I will miss just feeling her presence in the house and around me all the time.”

Bass supported, with not just her money but her time and talent, a fledgling Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in the 1990s. Through the years, she contributed to organizations such as HRC, Ruth Ellis Center and Hotter Than July – Detroit Black Gay Pride, as well as various HIV/AIDS organizations and African American causes. She also lent support to her wife’s Ladies of a Current Affair social club. And like each member of the Bell family, Bass was a lifetime member of the NAACP.

Speaking on Bass’ accomplishments and contributions to Between The Lines (BTL) and the Pride Source Media Group, former BTL co-publisher Jan Stevenson said this at Bass’ funeral, which took place Tuesday, Nov. 16 in the chapel of the Detroit Memorial Park Cemetery in Warren:

“June and Treva invested in this crazy project and helped us get the thing off the ground,” Stevenson said. “They supported us all through the 25 years we owned the paper — right up to and including when we sold it last year. . . . It is not hyperbole to say that without the support of Treva and June, Between The Lines would not exist today.”

Bass is survived by Washington and their three daughters, Ebony, Princess and Raven, and three grandchildren, Jabran, Dylan and Bella. Donations can be made to www.birthdetroit.com.