

RENEWAL

A POAH MIDWEST NEWSLETTER



Sam Greenlee – A Singular Voice – and a Long-Time Woodlawn Resident that His Family and Admirers Hope You Will Get to Know and our City Honors

Family, friends and admirers of the late playwright, poet, U.S foreign service officer and Woodlawn native Sam Greenlee Jr., are working to honor his legacy and bring his work to a new generation.

Greenlee, best known for his book “The Spook Who Sat By the Door,” which is being re-released by Wayne State University Press this fall, grew up in West Woodlawn and later lived at 6146 South Kenwood, recently renamed for housing activist Mattie Butler.

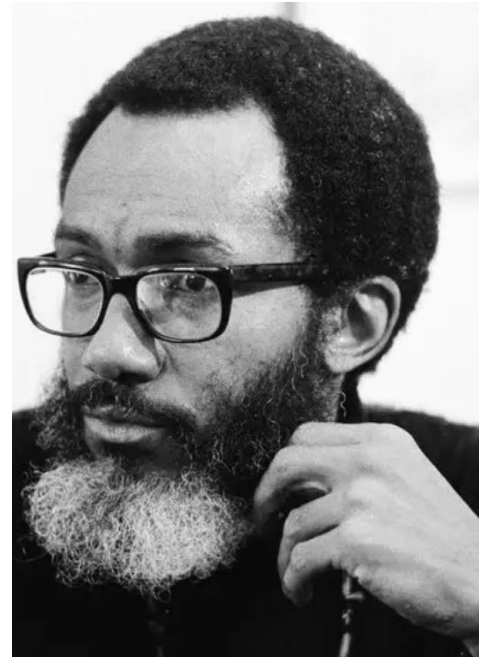
A group of Woodlawn residents led by Mike Medina is asking the city to name the 6100 block of Kenwood Avenue in Greenlee’s honor and have submitted a petition with more than 100 signatures toward that effort.

“I thought it was important to honor Sam’s life within the neighborhood in which he lived and chose as the setting for many of his important works,” Medina said. “It took on special urgency given the large-scale changes coming to Woodlawn. I still maintain that Woodlawn is the most significant Chicago neighborhood vis a vis its cultural contributions and impact on society. And Sam is a big part of that.”

Additionally, Greenlee’s daughter, Natiki Hope Pressley, has led efforts to re-release his best-known book, a semi-autobiographical novel about a Black man recruited by the CIA who ultimately uses his training to lead a Black revolutionary group based in Chicago. The new edition includes an introduction by Ms. Pressley placing the book in modern context.

“It’s about being a Black man in America, growing up and seeing generational issues of race, starting with the Depression and moving forward into the Civil Rights era,” said his daughter. “It was written 50 years ago, but it’s still very relevant. We wanted to give it new life, revive it.”

Later made into a movie, the 1969 book was considered so controversial that Mayor Richard J. Daley refused to allow its filming in Chicago. The book was rejected by American publishers but eventually released in London.



THE
SPOOK
WHO SAT BY
THE DOOR

SAM GREENLEE

The son of a union activist, Greenlee attended Englewood High and later the University of Wisconsin on a track scholarship. He joined the Army and served as an officer in the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in Iraq, East Pakistan, Indonesia, and Greece before earning a graduate degree at the University of Chicago and embarking on a writing career. He was Illinois Poet Laureate in 1990.

"He was a Chicago son, he loved Chicago," Ms. Pressley said. "His work in USIA was not as special to him as his service in the community." Greenlee grew up during the Depression, an experience in many ways harder for people of color because the economic struggles were compounded by racial segregation.

"I think his legacy is so much more than the book," added Ms. Pressley. "It's a legacy that's about self-empowerment. He really wanted people, especially in Woodlawn, to feel empowered. He was big on self-empowerment."

A Sam Greenlee Jr. Day was held on July 13, which would have been his 92nd birthday (he died in 2014). Events included the reading of a proclamation from Mayor Lightfoot outside the Mattie Butler Apartments and a book release event at the nearby Stony Island Arts Bank.

Ms. Pressley also hopes to establish a writing center in her father's name. "A writing center in Woodlawn would be his ultimate dream, to bring back a wonderful creative forum... If we could do something like that in my father's name, that would be amazing."