

Maritime Captain Allan Michael, civil rights pioneer, dedicated to ending racism

By Alice Bernstein
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I want people to know about Allan Michael (1958-2020), who broke new ground as one of the earliest maritime captains of color in New York Harbor, and as the first black captain at New York Circle Line Sightseeing Yachts, in a career spanning 37 years. In one of the busiest port cities in the U. S., as he captained boats with 600 passengers at a time, he never had an accident. And on that fateful day – September 11, 2001 – Michael was among the brave first responders, and used his Circle Line boat from morning to night, to ferry hundreds of terrified people from Ground Zero to safety in New Jersey. His bravery earned him a proclamation of gratitude from the mayor of NYC.

Michael will be remembered for his seeing that Aesthetic Realism, the education founded by the great poet and critic Eli Siegel, is the knowledge that can end racism. His study of what Siegel explained is the fight in all people between, contempt – the “addition to self through the lessening of something else,” and respect – wanting to know and be fair to the world, was central to his success as a mariner.

In 2017, he gave the keynote speech for the annual Black History Month scholarship dinner of the Organization of Black Maritime Graduates (OBMG). Founded in 1994, OBMG’s mission is to advance educational possibilities for African-American and minority students through scholarships, mentoring and forums on contribu-

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A Presentation at the US Capitol
Congressional Auditorium
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Maritime Captain Allan Michael, credit: David M. Bernstein



OBMG Scholarship recipients, Capt. Richard Cook at flag, Capt. Howard Wyche right of flag, Cadet Claudia Ziega, '22 (1st woman cadet in uniform from right). Credit: SUNY Maritime College.



Circle Line Boat XI (c) Circle Line Sightseeing Yachts, permission to use

tions of African Americans to the history of the Maritime Industry. Because of Michael’s contributions, he was elected to their board of directors.

He concluded his stirring keynote speech saying:

“It is hard to be black in this country and feel that justice is going to come your way, because black people have endured horrific injustice for years, from slavery to racial profiling. This has made for tremendous anger in our nation.”

And speaking about the principles of Aesthetic Realism and what he learned, he continued, “It was through the thought of Eli Siegel, a white man, that I was able to understand the deepest things in myself, and this points to a fundamental hope for all races. In beautiful prose, Mr. Siegel stated: ‘It will be found that black and white men have the same goodnesses, the same temptations, and can be criticized in the same way. The skin may be different, but the aorta

is quite the same.’ Humanity will thank him as I do for teaching in Aesthetic Realism how all people can honestly see each other with depth, kindness and respect.”

Michael’s address was greeted enthusiastically. “He kept everyone on the edge of their seat as he told his story,” stated the OBMG newsletter. And on his passing this year, OBMG founding board members, Captain Richard Cook and Captain Howard Whyche, wrote a moving tribute to Michael:

“His passion, quiet courage, kind heart and inimitable spirit are a model to be emulated and will be sorely missed. He wrote important articles on how racism can change through the study of Aesthetic Realism. With his wife, educator and public speaker, Monique Michael, he has taken part in nationwide performances of the stirring anti-racism production by Alice Bernstein, ‘The People of Clarendon County’ – A play by Ossie Davis, and the Answer to Racism.”

This year, Lori Colavito and I had the privilege of attending the February 27, OBMG Black History Month scholarship awards dinner, hosted by the Cultural Club at SUNY Maritime College, where 13 scholarships were awarded. It was deeply moving to hear narratives by young men and women who, in the face of income inequality and racial prejudice, are determined to succeed in the rare career opportunities OBMG offered to them. The response of mentors, students, cadets, teachers and families was joyous.

Stirring tributes were given by cadets to honor deceased mariners: Bahamian Captain Philip Thomas, who perished last September during Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas; L Antonio Litman, founder of Virginia’s House of Hope, providing scholarships to underprivileged youths for maritime careers through their Tugboat Program.

Cadet Claudia Ziega '22 (from Poland) read Captain Michael’s official OBMG bio, which tells of his study of Aesthetic Realism.

At the conclusion of the evening, Cadet Joshua Burris, originally from Louisiana, told me, “I want to learn Aesthetic Realism like the captain did.”

The video of Captain Michael’s 2017 keynote, is on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTSBCakUil>

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