

## A Historical Treasure in West Philly

By Leigh Buchanan

In the late 1950s, Dawud Hakim, an accountant for the city of Philadelphia, read with astonishment and pride *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro* and *The Five Negro Presidents*. Those books, by the journalist Joel Augustus Rogers, revealed a rich history of Black achievement. “My father became aware that our true story wasn’t being told,” says Yvonne Blake, one of Hakim’s daughters. “It lit a fire under him.”

With guidance from Rogers, Hakim began tracking down other titles about African American history and selling them from the trunk of his car. At the time, such books were scarce: many of them self-published. The subject was invisible in public schools.

“What my father was saying was foreign to people,” says Blake, who back then was a student at Girls’ High. “If you didn’t learn it in school, then it didn’t happen. And they taught us nothing about our history.”

In 1959, Hakim opened the brick-and-mortar **Hakim’s Book Store** in West Philadelphia. That business, which moved to 210 S. 52<sup>nd</sup> Street about 60 years ago, recently was awarded a state historical marker as the first and oldest Black-owned bookstore in the city.

But for the store’s first few years, such endurance seemed unlikely. Business was so slow that Hakim did taxes on the side: setting up folding chairs for those clients while bookstore customers browsed around them. Things improved during the Civil Rights Era. The Revolutionary Action Movement met at the store, and Hakim befriended its founder, Maxwell Stanford. He became active in civil

rights organizations. For a while in the '70s, FBI agents would stand across the street, taking pictures.

Hakim was particularly popular with young people, who sought from him knowledge they were denied elsewhere. "He would give them books if they didn't have money to buy them," says Blake. "But then you had to come back, and he would ask you questions about what you read."

The store also launched a service shipping to prisons. "I have had people say that because my father kept in contact and sent them books, they were able to reform themselves once they came out," says Blake.

Over the years, Hakim opened several more book stores, including one in Germantown and one in Atlanta. He also established House of Knowledge Publishing, which put out books that included Hakim's own about Arabic and African names.

Hakim died in 1997. Blake took over the store, which she runs with a volunteer and family members. She has greatly expanded the children's section and added gift items, including Kwanza candle sets, dolls, and wooden carvings. Otherwise, the selection—African American studies; memoirs of people like Angela Davis and Assata Shakur; and books about holistic health and religion—remains largely unchanged.

The store's fortunes have risen and fallen with the economy, experiencing a surge of mail order business from around the country after the murder of George Floyd. It is open four days a week. Other times Blake sells off-site at churches, schools, and places like the Paul Robeson House & Museum.

The recognition of Hakim's historical significance arrives at a moment when education is emerging as a critical battleground for racial justice. In states like Florida, politicians, parents, and others have attacked critical race theory, an AP course in African American studies, and the teaching of books like *Brown Girl Dreaming* and *The Hate U Give*. "It makes me angry," says Blake. "I am even more determined that people get the knowledge we have here in the store; that they read; and that they understand they have to make their own destinies."

*Leigh Buchanan is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force.*

**LINK**

**Hakim's Book Store:** <https://hakimsbookstore.com/>