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WENDELL GILLIARD: The councilman and union leader wants to make a difference in people's lives

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BY WEVONNEDA MINIS
Of The Post and Courier Staff

Photo: Charleston City Councilman Wendell Gilliard rides at Stono River Stable on Johns Island. The councilman first learned to ride at his maternal relatives' farm in Eutawville, where he and his siblings sometimes visited during summer vacations.

See PDF for 3 provided photos of Gilliard

Harris Street may not be in Wendell Gilliard's City Council district, but it's part of an East Side area that is special to him. That's where Gilliard developed his ideas about community responsibility that eventually would lead him into politics.

"We lived at 69 Harris St.," the councilman says more than 40 years after leaving that address. "The last time I saw my mother was in that house. She was standing at the stove cooking turkey wings. She had an aneurysm right in front of my brother Maurice and me. I was 5 years old."

His neighborhood was a housing project of individual residences, Gilliard says, but it was the whole village that raised him. His godmother, Thelma Bradley, lived across the street from him. Mary and Bobby Curry lived next door.

"They took my mother's place in taking us to church. They used to cook for us. They used to actually walk us to school. They helped us with our homework."

About two years after Mary Sinclair Gilliard's death, the councilman's father, William Leroy Gilliard, used the insurance benefits from her death to purchase a house for the children and himself.

Around 1963, they moved to the house on Ashley Avenue across the street from Hampton Park but stayed in close contact with friends living on the East Side. Gilliard continued to attend the community's Sanders-Clyde Elementary School, and neighbors continued to make him feel welcome.

His experiences taught him how to find time to lend a helping hand, he says. It was a commitment that stayed with him when he matured and was working as a plant manager at Mobil Chemical (later Albright & Wilson, and now Rhodia).

There he became a committeeman and then a vice president and president of United Steelworkers of America Local 863. In those roles, he became a visible part of the company's effort to be a charitable neighbor to residents in nearby communities such as Accabee, Rosemont and Silver Hill.

"It was all about giving and caring," Gilliard says. "We are all brothers and sisters in God's sight."

An example of the community assistance was the Albright & Wilson basketball team that challenged high schools and other company teams. The money raised from games was used to support community causes.

Gilliard also led union efforts to raise funds to help families with children who needed medical attention and to cover the costs of other family tragedies.

A highlight of his fund raising to benefit community projects was securing a \$150,000 donation from Albright & Wilson for The Community Foundation's New Fund. The fund provides grants to neighborhoods for projects such as those that improve parks, post crime watch signs and purchase recreation equipment.

"We were taking the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives," Gilliard says of the charitable efforts.

The activities prompted several ministers and community leaders to suggest that Gilliard run for public office, he says. Among them were the Rev. Willie E. Givens of First Baptist Church in Summerville and the late Rev. B.J. Whipper of St. Matthew Baptist Church on Huger Street.

Givens, his boss on summer jobs cleaning submarines, and Whipper, whose church he attended, told him he already was a community leader and appeared ready for public office, Gilliard says.

"My father would tell me that there are three kinds of people in this world, those who make things happen, those who watch things happen and those who wonder what the heck happened. I think these gentlemen saw me as a visionary, a mover-and-shaker, someone who was making a difference."

MAKING IT HAPPEN

In 1997, Gilliard ran for Charleston City Council and was elected to represent District 6, which includes parts of the peninsula that are south and west of the corner of Rutledge and Congress streets and several West Ashley neighborhoods, including Ashleyville, Avondale, Charles-towne Estates, Heathwood and Maryville.

Since then, Gilliard has set in motion:

-- Project Cool Breeze to assist the elderly in obtaining fans, air conditioners and money to help with summer utility bills. The goal is to prevent elderly deaths from heat stroke.

-- An ordinance limiting adult businesses to industrial areas. A court recently upheld the ordinance that could force C&C Video and News store on St. Andrews Boulevard to close or relocate. The business has appealed.

-- The creation of the Martin Luther King Jr. District along the Cannon and Spring streets corridor and an allocation of \$1.8 million to make improvements in the area's infrastructure.

Gilliard was inspired early on to enter public service by Septima Clark, a Charlestonian and director of citizenship education for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He got to know Clark, a neighbor, through her nephews Eli and Neri of Hickory, N.C., with whom he played when they spent summers with her in Charleston. Gilliard recalls that Clark told him he seemed to have the aptitude for public office.

"When she'd tell us about Dr. King and why he was doing the things that he was doing, I'd feel like I was getting firsthand information," Gilliard says.

As a child, he marveled as he stood looking down President Street and glimpsed civil rights leaders entering Clark's home. They included the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Andrew Young.

"I was in awe of these people going in and out of her house."

GROWING UP

Gilliard's father, whose family comes from Marion, worked in the shipping department at the Charleston Air Force Base. The elder Gilliard, who died last summer, also ran a barbershop off East Bay Street. His sons would go to a dump near the barbershop to watch the birds.

On some visits, they would stop and pick blackberries that grew on a nearby railroad track and take them home where his mother, and later a neighbor, would make blackberry dumplings.

Mary Gilliard, whose family comes from Eutawville, worked on the assembly line at the cigar factory at East Bay and Columbus streets. Gilliard and his five siblings sometimes would spend part of their summers in Eutawville. His cousin Maude usually took care of them. The family would pass the time riding out in a boat to catch blackfish from a freshwater creek.

Gilliard recalls spending much of those times teasing Maude's bull, riding a horse and picking cotton. At times, his grandmother would send him and one of his brothers outside to kill a chicken before preparing a meal.

"I felt blessed because we had the best of both worlds," says Gilliard, who became familiar with life in the city and the country.

After later attending A.B. Rhett Elementary School, Gilliard went on to Burke and Rivers high schools, where he became interested in electronics. After graduating from Rivers in 1973, he attended Bell and Howell School of Technology (now DeVry School of Technology) for three years.

However, his exposure to the retail business in a King Street store called International Tops and Bottoms took him in another direction. Although still interested in electronics, he saw learning the business in a store owned by his brother Leroy and family friend Carl Curry as an opportunity to gain skills that one day could allow him to earn more money than he could on a job.

He left Bell and Howell in 1976 to manage International Tops and Bottoms while Leroy and his partner opened a second King Street store called 7th Door Down. "We were on top of the world, and all of a sudden, here comes the mall, and it started taking business away," Gilliard says. Their sales declined and the stores closed.

In 1981, Gilliard went to work as a plant supervisor at Mobil Chemical. His job was to supervise mixing chemicals.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Early in his career at the plant, Gilliard was elected committeeman for the United Steelworkers local. Soon afterward, he started taking union courses in public relations, public speaking and grievance conducted at Tennessee State University. Two years later, he was elected local vice president and then president for five, four-year terms.

Since being elected to City Council, Gilliard says, he has become known for things such as introducing a resolution to recognize the Ku Klux Klan as a terrorist organization, to have cost-of-living increases put into the city employees' pay and curbing violence among youths.

However, Gilliard says, the most important citywide issue since he's been serving on council has been the 2 a.m. bar closings. The councilman says the early closing ordinance is not the way to deal with complaints of disturbances.

Gilliard says that he would have preferred that the police curb the disturbances. He says the ordinance puts the club owners at a disadvantage. "In a city where most of the revenues come from tourism, we ought to be promoting business, not doing things to harm business. It, at least, ought to be moved to 3 a.m."

The most important issues for Gilliard's District 6 are drugs and associated crimes, says Gilliard, who supports installing cameras in neighborhoods to catch criminals. "It's sad when you pull into some of these blocks and people are running up to your car trying to sell you drugs," he says. Gilliard says cameras may seem like a harsh solution, but "harsh problems need harsh solutions. Drugs are like a cancer. If they go unchecked, the problem will spread."

Gilliard has always been a highly committed, people-oriented person, says older brother Maurice Gilliard. His brother says when he worked on projects as a police community relations specialist for Mayor Joe Riley Jr., the younger Gilliard often helped as a volunteer. He assisted with projects, including one aimed at encouraging children to seek opportunities and another that raised food to feed the hungry.

Maurice says when he went to Washington to work for Mayor Marion Barry, his brother basically picked up where he left off. Wendell Gilliard, he says, has a special calling. "It is his nature to love and care for and help people. Even back at Sanders-Clyde Elementary, he would give his lunch to children who did not have any lunch.

"We're all very proud of him," Maurice Gilliard says, noting they come from a very large family.

"He could live without politics, but he could not live without helping people, and the best way for him to do that is through politics. I think Wendell will continue to do that as long as he is living. He understands that his mission is to be a peacemaker, a problem solver and a producer."

WENDELL GILLIARD

BORN: Aug. 1, 1954, Charleston.

OCCUPATION: Councilman, city of Charleston. Plant operator, Rhodia.

EDUCATION: Attended DeVry School of Technology and Labor Organizing College at Tennessee State University.

FAMILY: Children, Jervy, 26; Wendell, 23; Keith, 22; and April, 20.

HOBBIES: Horseback riding and swimming.

FANTASY DINNER COMPANIONS: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy.

IF YOU COULD LIVE AT ANOTHER TIME: The beginning of time.

IF YOU HAD TO LIVE IN ANOTHER PLACE: Ethiopia.

FAVORITE READING SUBJECTS: Science fiction, politics.

FAVORITE MOVIE: "All the President's Men."

FAVORITE TRIP: Went to Toronto. Got to meet a lot of Canadian Indians.

DREAM VACATION: Aruba.

CHARACTERISTIC HE DISLIKES IN PEOPLE: Prejudice.

SAYING TO LIVE BY: Pride comes before a great fall.

FAVORITE TV PROGRAMS: "Dateline" and "2-0/20."

FAVORITE COMEDIAN: Bill Cosby.

ARE PEOPLE BASICALLY GOOD? All of us are good, but we let opportunities to use that good fall by the wayside.

WHAT IRKS YOU? Movies like "Barbershop." I was appalled at a segment that degraded Rosa Parks and Dr. King.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING IN 10 YEARS? Serving as a U.S. senator.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR GRAVESTONE TO SAY? Been here. Done that. Gone.

Wevonneda Minis writes features. Contact her at 937-5705 or wminis@postandcourier.com.

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