

A Kilpatrick Administration

By Naseem Stecker

A

t 31 years of age, Kwame M. Kilpatrick, the newly-elected mayor of Detroit, is the youngest in the history of the city to hold that office. He came into power after a hard-fought, sometimes-bitter campaign, winning over 54 percent of the votes in America's 10th largest city—a city beset with a multitude of problems ranging from the lack of basic services such as garbage pick-up to budgetary and governmental difficulties at a time of economic downturn.

An energetic candidate (his campaign motto was “Our Future . . . Right Here Right Now!”), Kilpatrick is a new-generation African American leader poised to make an impact on the political fortunes and well-being of his beloved city. Before he took on the myriad challenges of the mayor's office, he served as the state House Democratic leader in the Michigan Legislature—another first for an African American in the history of this state.

A lifetime resident of Detroit, Kilpatrick is a 1992 graduate of Florida A&M University, where he earned a degree in political science and his teacher certification. He completed his Juris Doctorate degree at the Detroit College of Law. Political education began early in his life—his mother is U.S. Congresswoman Carolyn



Photographs by Carrie Pickett

Cheeks Kilpatrick. His father, Bernard Kilpatrick, serves as chief of staff to Wayne County executive Ed McNamara. The following is from an interview with Mayor Kilpatrick on January 17, 2002 at his office in the Coleman Young Municipal Building in downtown Detroit.

for Detroit

Mayor, you come from a political family. What was it like growing up in such a family?

You always had to go door-to-door, you had to go to a phone bank, you had to volunteer, you had to work in someone's campaign—if it wasn't my mother's or father's, I had to work in someone else's, but [there] was always a real focus on politics and public service. It was incredible; it was great.

You started out as a teacher. Why did you decide to go to law school?

I always wanted to have a law degree because I thought in politics that would help—I never really wanted to be a defense attorney or anything like that. When I started teaching and coaching and doing different things, I just wouldn't let that dream die and I decided to go to law school at night Incredibly, my twins were born the first semester of law school, but I stuck it out.

Did you get a lot of encouragement from your parents?

My mother and my father always encouraged me to do whatever I thought I wanted to do. You dream it; you can achieve it—that was their thing. I got a lot of encouragement from them but at that time my wife [Carlita]

said, "keep going to school, stay in there, stay focused." And I couldn't have done it without her.

How will your background as a lawyer and educator help in your work as mayor?

The main thing when you're teaching is to help kids understand how good they already are at something. I think a great deal of being a public servant is showing your constituency how good it already is. We have unlimited potential but we're already okay and let's move from this point forward. In legal training, the tangible stuff is going to school every night, studying, organizing your thoughts, being decisive, hanging in there and persevering through law school, studying for the bar, passing the bar, and achieving success. But then the actual substantive part of the education was great too—understanding the law, understanding how decisions are made. Understanding legislation, how it impacts decision-making and decision-makers—all of those things helped me.

You're the first African American to lead any party in the state legislature. Why did you become a legislator?

[It was] a lifelong dream. When I was eight years old, my mother was elected to the state legislature, so you grow up wanting to do what your mom did. I used to play tag and hide-and-go-seek in the Capitol. So I was a kid . . . playing around in the Capitol and always believed that one day I would have that job. Coming out of college, I knew it was a matter of time before I ran for office, but that's something I always wanted to do. I got to see my mother help people and they loved her for it. I just thought that was the greatest.

What do you consider your most important achievements while you were in the legislature?

I think one, as far as legislation, was remediation for children with low MEAP scores. We were labeling children at that time as failing students. What I did was change it so that when they didn't pass the first time, the state had to go in and do some remediation—help these children understand, help them read, [do] math, whatever part they were failing in. Before, we just labeled kids. I thought that was important because that stigma attached to a child can be detrimental or deadly.

The second piece was the Clean Michigan Initiative. I think that was huge—a \$675-million bond initiative. Sixty to sixty-five percent of those monies came or are coming to the city of Detroit and were used to address some of the environmental concerns of the state. Outside of legislation: being elected to leadership positions, floor leader, and then leader by my colleagues from all over the state. People from the Upper Peninsula, west Michigan, south eastern Michigan all came together and elected me as their leader—unbelievable.

Do you plan to continue using your legislative links in Lansing to help the city of Detroit?

Yes. We already have. We have reached out to Lansing in the early part of this administration. We've had some success.

Can you give me an example?

I talked throughout the campaign of how we leave money on the table in Lansing because we were not filling out the paperwork. We don't go after it. In one instance, when

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we got here in the second week, there were 18 million dollars in MDOT—one application that we never filled out . . . [The] money [was] available and it was because of the contacts we had here. They just reached out and called and said we have this money. We were able to get \$18 million dollars into this city in two weeks—in the two weeks that we've been here.

The speaker has been down here twice, [which is] unheard of—the Speaker of the House from Leroy, Michigan. [He] has been down here . . . to talk about a legislative agenda and working together.

You've broken some barriers—youngest mayor, first African American to lead any party in the state legislature. Do you consider your youth to be an asset?

I think it's a tremendous asset. Part of the reason is that you just have the energy to do the job. I can't imagine being here at 60 or 70. I really couldn't. It would be tough. We've been out to a couple of different places today, [then] back here for meetings . . . I also believe in the current state that Detroit is in—losing population—to be 31 [years old] and have the ability to attract more young families here with children [is an asset]. I think it's a good place to be. To have a young mayor that really understands the new technology and to invite those people in, you need, if not a younger person, a younger ideology in your administration, so I think that helps.

The Detroit Recorder's Court was eliminated in 1997. Did you have any concerns about that and what has happened since?

I think that happened in '96. That was the year before I went to the legislature. I think now they're working through some of the issues. That was one of the jewels of the

city—the Recorder's Court. I think that [eliminating it] was detrimental to people getting a fair trial here in the city, especially in criminal trials. I think it's important that when you talk about a jury of your peers (you're talking about a city this large having that type of court, then bust it up, and melt it into a larger system), I think it hurt the judicial system down here for a while. Now they're grabbing hold of it on the understanding that [there have] to be different divisions. You see judges being placed where they're more sensitive to the issues. I think they're recovering, but at first it was tremendously detrimental to the city of Detroit and it hurt.

What is your reaction to the over-representation of African American juveniles in the criminal justice system? Do you plan to do anything?

Absolutely. We have three priorities—cops, kids, and clean. One is to restructure our police department so it really addresses the specific concerns of communities around the city. At the same time, we're working on "Mayor's Time," which is an after-school program between the hours of 3 and 8 [p.m.], when 82 percent of juvenile delinquency takes place.

We feel that if you give young people an opportunity to do something positive to really engage their minds, cognitive skills, employment skills, and technology skills after school, you would start a real crime prevention program. You would have young people involved in something tangible that they can actually deal with, they can touch, they can feel, and then we start to work on those crime issues.

Volunteerism will come into place when you have "Mayor's Time." We want to wrap the community's arms around some of our young people who really need people to talk to. In the type of city we live in, young peo-

ple all over the city don't have the same type of home setting. If we can just start to deter them [from crime] because we're stimulating their minds and their thinking, I think that will be the healthy way of deterring juvenile crime. It has to happen, especially like you said, with the over-representation [in the juvenile system] of our children here in this city that are of African American descent.

What are some of the other problem areas in Detroit you plan to focus on?

The fiscal, financial piece of this city—to employ some type of fiscal discipline in city government and a real fiscal operation. We have a Chief Financial Officer, we understand the money that's out there, we understand budgets for different departments, and people are not just by themselves with the sole responsibility of taking over those budgets and going outside of those budgets.

Since November, we've been working on the restructuring of our economic development plan. The Planning and Development Department will bring all entities under one umbrella so everyone is working together to really move development forward in the city. So we're bringing this Chief Development Officer position in city government.

As far as social issues, we really have to look at our housing department in providing adequate housing for the citizens of this city. Providing adequate housing means low-income affordable, middle-income, and high-income housing. So we need a housing plan because what you don't want is a city that has all people making under a certain income level. You want diversity in your town. Although there's a real growing need for low-income and affordable housing there's also a need to bring upper-income housing into the city so we can have that mix, that diversity, that strong middle class tax base that we need.



Downtown Detroit has undergone a good deal of revitalization. How do you plan to transfer this revitalization into the neighborhoods?

It's on the road to revitalization. Downtown is a neighborhood. The only way it works is that people live down there. We have a ten-area core neighborhood development plan for the traditional neighborhoods in the city. We've already given that to Planning and Development to overlay on their clusters of development and to coordinate with schools and other entities on how we can develop each neighborhood and establish new development out there.

The first engagement of those clusters is an emergency clean-up plan for the city. They broke the clean-up into ten different areas over the course of the next several months. In dealing with community development associations that are already at work in neighborhoods, we'll figure out what the demand is and what they need. Is it housing? Is it retail? What is it? Is it community centers? Is it recreation centers? We're really starting to engage the neighborhoods to figure out what they need because some areas just need more police presence or better retail; it's not necessarily the same thing in every neighborhood. We need to recognize the unique needs of each neighborhood.

Can you elaborate on the police shake-up?

There's a new police chief. That's huge. [He's] the first police chief that's been selected from outside in over 30 years. But [he's] also a person who's in the national chief and international chief organizations. They're part of some of the funding agencies for policing in the country. He's a part of those funding agencies. He understands new policing, new techniques, and also uses the concept of community policing as a value. He doesn't believe in favoritism for promo-

tion. He believes that a strong police department is what you have to have and public safety is what you have to have for everything else, which is in line with my belief for economic development and all other things.

He's going to begin by going in with an idea of excellence and professionalism, service, running the police department as a business. That will be a major shake-up within itself. We've been doing the same thing the same way in our police department for an incredibly long time, so to operate in a different manner you'll see what they call a shake-up. Civilianization of the police department, giving more qualified civilians some positions that current police officers are doing—all those different things will happen over the course of the next four years.

Recently, a federal appeals court struck down the procedure under which Detroit's three casinos were licensed, and an American Indian tribe that challenged the policy said it would try to shut them down. What's your administration's response?

We've been meeting and developing a strategy on how we move forward. We'll gather all the information from the development agreements that we currently have on the table and make this decision. It takes longer than one or two days. We really need to understand what the court is asking. There wasn't anything specific laid out.

I think it is critically important that casinos develop permanent sites here in the city of Detroit. I think they realize the type of money that they can make here. They've made a billion dollars since they've been open. We want that tax base here in the city, and we want to push them to make sure they live out what they said in their development

agreements—that they would have permanent casinos. The problem is we don't know who those casinos are going to be now. Hopefully, that will be something we'll discuss in our team meetings.

Your predecessor, Mayor Dennis Archer, has said that he wanted to leave behind a world-class city or at least a city on its way to being world-class. Does Detroit have that potential?

Yes, Detroit has that potential. Detroit had that potential 20 years ago. We have an international waterway. We have a trade relationship with Canada that is huge. We are the busiest point of entry into the United States of America; we have the largest foreign trade zone. We have the largest corporation in America right in downtown Detroit. We have a nationally-traded technology firm right in the heart of the city that's investing \$400 million in our city. We have a rich city that's full of quality neighborhoods, and we're on the brink, really on the cusp, of experiencing some real progress and prosperity here.

It's going to take some real fiscal discipline, some real honest and hard decision-making, but this can be the city that we all want it to be. We have a superbowl coming up in January 2006. We have national trade shows and different people coming to town and we have to make our city ready to accept that international presence. We have to get there; we have to be the world-class city or we won't be anything because the world is coming here over the next ten years for different reasons. So we need to make sure we make a good impression. It's up to this mayor and this administration to get this city ready to accept that.

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What do you expect to be the most challenging issues to you as mayor?

The biggest challenge is to move the city forward without leaving anybody behind. I think that's an incredible challenge. We've been heavily reliant on the manufacturing industry in this town for years. This is Motown, this is the automotive capital of the world, and it really bred a situation where people went through high school and went into the plant.

Wayne County Community College just did a study that said that 7 percent of our adult population have college degrees. The national average is 33 percent for a city this size. So our challenge is how do we move into the 21st century, how do we engage the global marketplace, how do we make the switch from being heavily-reliant on the manufacturing industry to a high-skilled, high-tech economy without leaving any of our people behind. That is why that "Mayor's Time" program is so critically important.

It's so important that the community comes and helps us develop our technology program [and] cognitive skills program for our children so they can make the switch because it's happening, we're moving, and everyone in the city wants to move with us.

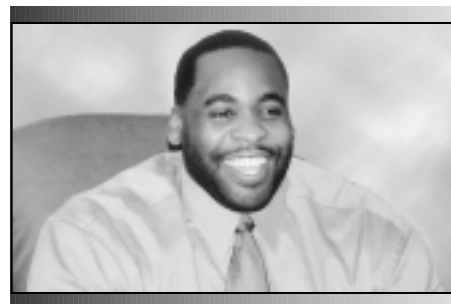
You were able to move into a position of prominence in a very short time.

What do you attribute your success to?

God. God and my family. And my extended family, which includes some of the people that work around here. That's it. It's not all me, it couldn't be. It's these people around the office and the people who raised me and also the people in this city.

What advice would you give to other young lawyers who are interested in public service?

Organize. Get involved. Dive all the way into it. Don't let anybody tell you that you're not ready and that it's not your time.



Wait your turn. If you truly have a passion for service, go out and organize and get there. You can do it. I think that the training you get in law school is an incredible head start to the type of training you need when you get into public service. So if you have the passion and will to serve with that law school training, by all means go out and get started. ♦

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at nstecker@mail.michbar.org.