

Reflections of a Former Ypsilanti Mayor

BY GEORGE D. GOODMAN

Early Years

My early years in Ypsilanti are filled with fond memories. I lived on the south side on Madison Street, and recall that back then, the streets were not paved. When it rained, our street was filled with mud. While I don't recall exactly when Madison was finally paved, in my later years, I came to recognize that the main reason for the unpaved streets in our neighborhood was its location on the south side, home to most of the city's African American population.

My dad worked at the Ford Motor Company in River Rouge, and he carpooled daily with the same men. Every weekday, he was up at 4:00 a.m. ready to travel to River Rouge to work. My mother was a homemaker, and she was also interested in serving the community. She started a business from our basement selling hair products. I recall watching as all the various contents were mixed and bottled. Labels were attached and the hair products were ready for sale.

During my youth, my grandfather lived with us. He showed me how to ride my bike. He also helped to build a swing that hung from a huge tree in the yard. Since we lived three blocks from the I-94 expressway, then under construction, he warned me to never get too close to the area. This was obviously my cue to do the opposite.

One day, fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars drove past our house at high rates of speed. There had been an accident on the unfinished expressway—a semi-trailer had rear-ended another vehicle. Notwithstanding my grandfather's admonition, I ended up at the site as an observer. Suddenly, I felt a swat against my back leg. My grandfather had hobbled down the street to tell me to get home. I grabbed my bike and headed back to our house. In hindsight, I realize it had been my grandfather's opportunity to also take in the accident.

After my mother's success at selling hair products, my parents began discussions about

opening a store to sell women's clothes that would also include a beauty parlor. This idea came to fruition, and Goodman's Fashion Center on Harriet Street opened in 1947.

Other important factors led to their decision to build a store primarily for women on the south side of Ypsilanti. At that time, there was a store in downtown Ypsilanti called the Dixie Shop. Women of color could buy clothing at this store, but they were not allowed to try on the clothing. Women living on the south side of Ypsilanti at that time had no place to shop for clothes.

Education and Service

I attended Roosevelt School (RHS) from elementary through high school, playing football and participating in the drama and speech programs. I took a Dale Carnegie speech course and was successful in getting great scores from my peers.

I served as student council president during my senior year, and I was also one of the students selected to participate in the Michigan Chorale, a program sponsored by Youth for Understanding. After graduation, the chorale traveled to Germany to perform a series of concerts. This experience sparked my interest in international travel.

Upon graduation from Eastern Michigan University with a BA in Political Science and the rank of second lieutenant in the U.S. Army, I was assigned to Germany as my first duty assignment. I was married and my wife was able to travel with me. We spent nearly three years there. Our first child was born in Frankfurt at the 97th General Army Hospital.

Returning to Ypsilanti after my army service, I was hired to teach at Roosevelt School. It was my good fortune to be the commencement speaker, in 1967, for Roosevelt's last graduating class.

Community Opportunities

At that time, Ypsilanti's first Black mayor, John Burton, appointed me to the Human Relations Commission, and this became my introduction to community service. Eventually, I became chair, and we took an active role in reviewing and advocating for an open-housing law in Ypsilanti.

After leaving Roosevelt, I was hired as an admissions counselor at the University of Michigan, where I spent five years in the undergraduate admissions office, recruiting students for U-M's Opportunity Program. It was designed to admit more minority students to the university, who were, in that era, being systemically left out. After five years in the admissions office, I became director of the Opportunity Program.

In 1970, I won election to Ypsilanti City Council, and they elected me mayor, in 1972. After a charter revision, the voters elected me mayor in 1973, and I served as mayor for ten years.

In 1983, I resigned my position at U-M to become director of the Michigan

Municipal League (MML), an association that supports the cities and villages of Michigan. Their offices are in Ann Arbor, and they have an office in Lansing as well. I spent twenty-two years with the MML.

The Work of a Mayor

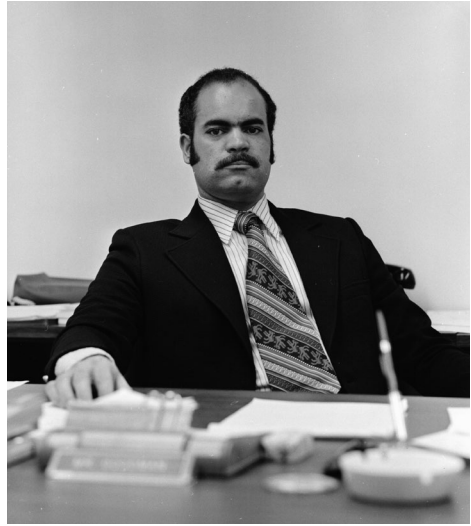
During my ten years as mayor, city hall relocated to a building at the corner of Michigan Avenue and South Huron Street. Senior citizen housing complexes were built downtown and on Chidester Street. Several new bridges were built, along with the first public swimming pool.

The pool did not come about without controversy. The siting of the pool became an issue, and after much discussion among community members, the council decided to build the pool in Recreation Park. The swimming pool was named after Jesse Rutherford, the first director of Parkridge Community Center.

In 1973, I was honored to be mayor during Ypsilanti's 150th birthday celebration. Co-chaired by Marcia Harrison and John Kirkendall, the Sesquicentennial Committee oversaw numerous community activities that occurred throughout that year.

During this time, Ypsilanti also had a sister-city relationship with Nafion, Greece, the city in which General Demetrius Ypsilanti died. Considered the George Washington of Greece, General Ypsilanti helped to liberate his country during its war with the Turks. Today, a bust of Demetrius Ypsilanti sits at the base of the Ypsilanti Water Tower. A second sister city was Dakar, the capital of Senegal. While neither of these sister-city relationships led to in-person visits by local officials from either municipality, communications were exchanged. I received an autographed copy of a large picture book from the City of Nafion, and I later donated it to the Ypsilanti Historical Society.

During the early 1970s, the Federal Revenue Sharing program was in place, and Ypsilanti was eligible to receive its share of these funds. The Ypsilanti Community Utility Authority (YCUA) was formed. This joint water and sewer authority took advantage of federal dollars that were available at that time. Neither Ypsilanti nor Ypsilanti Township could qualify for the federal funds separately. But combining the populations of both units of government made this new entity eligible for the funds. After several conversations between officials from the township and city council, the agreement was ratified.



Mayor George Goodman in the 1970s

Consoling the Community

Some of the most difficult incidents that occurred during my tenure as mayor involved the death of local residents. After the tragic shooting of a local resident at the hands of an Ypsilanti police officer, I attended a gathering of angry citizens at Perry School. There were outbursts of anger and chants that I completely understood, but I felt the need to do what I could to calm the everyone down. After promising a thorough investigation based on the facts, the crowd gradually calmed down and what could have become an explosive situation in the community was averted. (The Ypsilanti Police Chief was present at the gathering, and when it ended, he discovered that the tires on his car had been slashed.)

In 1975, police officer Doug Downing was killed during the holdup of a bank across the street from the Ypsilanti State Police post. When I received word of Downing's death, I was visiting the Ypsilanti State Hospital, and I went directly to the scene of the crime. It is one I will never forget. Downing's body was still lying on the floor of the bank while the investigation was wrapping up.

Another tragedy in Ypsilanti during my tenure occurred in 1978. Three Ypsilanti boys were killed in a tragic bus accident in Georgia. They were traveling to Disney World in Florida when the brakes on the bus failed while attempting to stop at a rest area. The bus had gone down an embankment and struck a tree. Jasen Freeman, Sam Bates, and Tony Sablowski were the local boys we lost, and I was part of a delegation that traveled to Tifton, Georgia, to erect a memorial plague in their memory. These tragedies have remained vivid memories for me.

Master of Ceremonies

Ypsilanti has a council-manager form of government. The mayor and city council appoint the city manager, who runs the day-to-day operations of the city.

As mayor, my role was part-time. I presided at council meetings and attended a variety of ceremonial occasions on behalf of the city. Under a change in state law, I was given the authority to perform marriages. However, a stipulation was that the marriage must be performed within the city limits.

If I was going to preside over a wedding, the happy couple first had to pay the fee to the city treasurer. I had asked our city council to pass an ordinance requiring this.



George Goodman in Summer 2016

I was aware that Dearborn's controversial mayor, Orville Hubbard, who was known for marrying innumerable couples on the steps of Dearborn's city hall, was subject to unsubstantiated rumors, questioning exactly where these fees to perform weddings went. Because of this, I asked our city council to pass an ordinance stating that the fee for a marriage had to be paid to the city treasurer.

I performed several marriages on the indoor steps of city hall and at my home. In one instance, my wife and young sons acted as witnesses.

On one occasion I was asked to perform two ceremonies. The first one was the official event at city hall and the second took place on a boat on Ford Lake.

Once I performed a marriage ceremony on a Friday afternoon at city hall, and I arrived at my U-M office on Monday morning to a call asking me to annul the marriage. I said I was very sorry to hear this, but I explained that I did not have that authority. I never heard anything about how this unfortunate situation turned out.

In one unusual instance, I was the only person in the room who spoke English. The couple had brought an interpreter who translated the entire ceremony into Japanese.

Looking Back

One of the highlights of my tenure as mayor was an invitation to a campaign event for President Jimmy Carter. He was as warm and gracious as you would expect.

During both my professional and public service careers, I have stressed the importance of volunteerism through community involvement. Whether serving as an elected official or a member of a nonprofit organization, I have always found it rewarding to see others grow into leadership roles in the community.

The role and function of local, state, and national governments are important and essential.

I am honored, as a former mayor, to share a few thoughts as Ypsilanti celebrates its Bicentennial.



Goodman with President Jimmy Carter

A Note on Sources

All images were provided by the author.

About the Author

George D. Goodman served as mayor of Ypsilanti for ten years, from 1972 to 1982. He retired from the Michigan Municipal League, in 2005.