Biography of Lawrence Douglas Wilder

Former Virginia Governor L. Douglas Wilder became Richmond’s new mayor on January 2, 2005, following his election by an overwhelming majority of voters.

A Richmond native, Mr. Wilder brings decades of political leadership to his new position, and his career is highlighted with many precedents.

Mr. Wilder became the first African-American to be elected governor in the U.S., leading the Commonwealth of Virginia from 1990 to 1994. As governor, he was commended for his sound fiscal management and balancing the state budget during difficult economic times. *Financial World* magazine ranked Virginia as the best managed state in the U.S. for two consecutive years under his Administration. He served as lieutenant governor from 1986 to 1990.

Serving as a state senator representing Richmond from 1969 to 1985, Mr. Wilder became the first African-American state senator in Virginia since Reconstruction. During his five terms as a state senator, he chaired committees on transportation; rehabilitation and social services; privileges and elections; the Virginia Advisory Legislative Council; and the Senate Steering Committee, which appoints committee members. He successfully sponsored Virginia’s first drug paraphernalia law and the compulsory school attendance law.

Other legislative achievements as state senator include providing state health care coverage for sickle-cell anemia patients, toughening penalties for capital murderers and prison escapees, and expanding low and moderate income housing. For eight years, he persisted in sponsoring legislation that eventually led to establishing a state holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Finding the fiscal problems and social injustice of this great nation intolerable, Wilder declared for the presidency on September 13, 1991. He strongly felt that a message of fiscal prudence, racial healing and caring for people had to be delivered to America. But, on January 8, 1993, citing his responsibilities as Governor to be paramount, Wilder withdrew from the race to re-devote all of his attention and energies to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

He was appointed chairman of Gov. Mark Warner’s Commission on Efficiency and Effectiveness in 2002 and also that year, co-chaired the Wilder-Bliiley Charter Commission that advocated the at-large election of mayor.
In addition to currently serving as mayor, Mr. Wilder is a Distinguished Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, a newspaper columnist and the driving force for establishing a national Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, Va.

Recipient of more than three dozen honorary degrees, Mr. Wilder has received numerous awards that include the NAACP Spingarn Medal, the Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Medallion of Honor, the SCLC Drum Major for Justice Award, the B’Nai B’rith’s Great American Traditions Award, and the Thurgood Marshall Award of Excellence.

As an attorney, Mr. Wilder gained recognition as a leading criminal trial lawyer. He graduated from Howard University Law School in 1959 and later established the legal firm that became known as Wilder, Gregory & Associates, one of the few minority-owned businesses in Virginia at the time. Prior to his law degree, he graduated from Virginia Union University with a B.S. degree in chemistry.

Serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism in combat while rescuing wounded GIs and capturing enemy troops.

Mr. Wilder is the father of three grown children: Lynn Diana, an artist; Lawrence Jr., an attorney; and Loren Wilder-James, a market and finance analyst.

Born on January 17, 1931 in Richmond, Mr. Wilder was the grandson of slaves. He grew up in the Church Hill section of the City. His parents named him after abolitionist-orator Frederick Douglass and poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar.