

Politics

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY KRISTIN POST

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In 1969, a historic event took place in Chapel Hill. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other media took note. On May 6, 1969, Howard Lee¹ became the first African American mayor elected in a predominantly white southern town since Reconstruction. The race was close, Lee won by a very small margin. Even before he was elected, Rebecca Clark was approached by others to see if she would support his campaign. She had been involved in politics throughout her adult life, and she was well known for her efforts in helping “get out the vote” amongst the African American community. Since blacks made up 10 percent of the population, their participation was key to Lee’s victory. In this next excerpt, Mrs. Clark describes how she was asked to work on Howard Lee’s campaign, and why she was in the janitor’s closet on election night.

Preliminary questions

1. Why was post-Reconstruction a highpoint for the election of African Americans? What happened to change African American participation in politics?
2. What does it mean to “get out the vote?” Why is this particularly important in minority communities?
3. How important is the election of African American politicians to you in your life?

The recording

This media is available in the web edition only.

Transcript

Bob Gilgor

Did you help Howard Lee and his campaign get elected?

Rebecca Clark

They said I did. What happened, Howard Lee, I'll never forget: this lady called me to her home and said, "You know, Rebecca, we're thinking of you. We got a young man on campus, have you met him?" I said, "No, I heard of him." "His name is Howard Lee. We would like for him to run for mayor. We want a black mayor." And I said, "Fine." We met two or three other people at this lady's house, she lived up on McAuley Street. And we all got together and we worked. And talk about working; we worked hard.

At that time, my son had a Greyhound bus. My children were all registered to vote. We were getting everybody that we knew to vote. So on that election day — I'll never forget it — my son had a Greyhound bus () and he went street to street and they knew he was coming. Blowing his horn. We loaded them to the poll. Howard Lee won before the votes all got in.

And I'll never forget because I was working with Charlotte Adams and Mrs. Pappa, from the School of Social Work, Dr. John Pappa's mother. We were out at that poll with Charlotte Adams and others counting that night. Then we were doing it by hand, counting ballots, one, two, three, four, five, tally. And that place was packed. I guess we must have had a thousand people to vote in our precinct that night. And I had a man at our table who became a good friend later. And we were counting. And photographer was standing there. (). And Howard was winning. And in doing so, the fellow was looking to see how we were tallying so he'd know what to call into the newsroom. And this fellow turned and said, "Stop standing over me! I don't want you breathing over me!" Of course that fouled up everybody's count. We had to count over. We did more counting over than we were really counting that night because of this man at our table.

So we had this lady by the name of... I was hoping I'd remember her. I'm getting where I forget. She worked at the Y. So she was there. She lived in my precinct, she was there. And in doing so, the votes were coming in, the votes were coming in. And coming in, she came to me and said, "When you get a break, come into the janitor's room." After a while, there was someone to relieve me, I asked for a break because you're not allowed to have radios at the polling place. But somebody had put a radio in the janitor's closet. So we were sitting in the janitor's closet. And Howard Lee was getting ready to make his acceptance speech. I said, "Can't be. We ain't even through." She said, "Oh, yes, we are." But we're still counting at Lincoln precinct. And he went on to thank all the folks that helped him, calling all these names. She said, "You heard that?" I said yes. Calling all those names.

And when he was winding down, he said, "I'm asking for Rebecca Clark. Where is she?" And they had packed St. Joseph's Church. The spread over in the street; there wasn't any room inside. The whites and blacks; they had to close off part of Rosemary Street there where St. Joseph Church is. "Rebecca Clark, Where are you? Come on down." And we're standing there, laughing. We're in the closet at Lincoln Center. And they were applauding, they were applauding.

You talk about work. We had worked and registered more people. And now you can't hardly get 'em to the polls.

Follow-up questions

1. Why do you think Mrs. Clark had to work hard to get Howard Lee elected?
2. Why did Mrs. Clark and her son need a Greyhound bus on election day?
3. What was she doing the night Howard Lee got elected?
4. Why did Mrs. Clark go to the janitor's room?
5. What is the significance of the fact that they were still counting ballots when Howard Lee announced his victory?
6. What is funny about the scene Mrs. Clark describes that night?
7. What does she mean by "you can't hardly get 'em to the polls." Do you agree with this statement?

On the web

Race in her lifetime

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/race-docsouth/>

In this lesson, students will use oral histories to trace the life of Rebecca Clark, an African American who was born in rural Orange County just before the Depression and witnessed the changes in civil rights over the years.

Howard Lee

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/6091>

Howard Lee's political career began with his election as mayor of Chapel Hill in 1969. He was the first African American mayor elected in a predominantly white southern town since Reconstruction.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/6091>.

About the author

KRISTIN POST

Kristin traveled around the world by herself from 2000-2001. She traveled west from California through New Zealand, Australia, Southeast Asia, China, India, Nepal, and East Africa. She brought along a mini disc recorder, and captured her experiences in sound as well as on film and on paper. Whenever she listens to this audio, she is transported into the moment with an immediacy her pictures and journal cannot imitate. She hopes that teachers, students and the general public will enjoy traveling the world through the sounds she captured in that year of her life.