

ROBERT LEWIS GILBERT: FIRST IN LINE

By

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Robert Lewis Gilbert: First in Line

The many parallels between the lives of Robert Lewis Gilbert and Dr. Martin Luther King are obvious: Both were sons of Baptist ministers and grew up in strong Christian families. They were bright, elegant orators; and they were determined to use their lives to make things better for others. Even the words on King's tomb would have been appropriate for Gilbert as well. However, his burial inscription reads: "The Little Giant Who Would Not Sit Down."

On December 27, 1941, in the Central Texas city of Waco, Robert Lewis Gilbert was the fourth of five children born to Baptist Minister Benjamin F. Gilbert and his wife Fannie Mae. Like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s father, B. F. Gilbert was highly respected throughout the religious community of Texas. Like King, at a very early age Robert recognized his mission in life: "Raised and reared in the social context of segregation, he would be one destined--as King was--to give his life service to the cause of fighting injustice and inequality" (Gilbert, K). Gilbert's "fights" produced several "firsts" for African Americans in Waco, thereby tearing down a number of the city's racial barriers.

For nearly 120 years, Baylor University of Waco had remained segregated. However, on November 1, 1963, in a split decision, Baylor regents voted to integrate (Baker 268). In 1965, Robert Gilbert, a transfer student from Waco's Paul Quinn College (now in Dallas), enrolled as one of only two African American students. Then in June of 1967, Gilbert became Baylor's first African American graduate. Originally, Gilbert transferred to Baylor because he wanted to attend law school.

However, a chronic serious illness caused Gilbert to change his plans. (Stone)

He recalled some incidents of racism while attending Baylor. Once during class, one of his professors remarked, “You sure don’t talk like a nigger.” (Stone) “I felt very isolated at Baylor, too...So, I pretty much had to get along by myself, even though by the time I graduated, there were about thirteen black students.”

(Barcus) In spite of this, Gilbert was grateful for his education and began working as a staff member of Baylor’s Upward Bound program—another first. This program helped high school underachievers to be better prepared to be academically and socially ready to apply for enrollment at Baylor or other colleges.

After graduating with a degree in history, Gilbert became Waco’s first black teacher in an all-white school. For three years, he taught history at Tennyson Junior High School, having to resign because of his health. By then, his battle with rheumatoid arthritis was growing stronger.

Actually, Gilbert was fourteen years old when he awakened one night with excruciating pains in his hip. Gilbert’s father, who could not move his neck neither left nor right due to rheumatoid arthritis, feared the worse. The doctor’s report confirmed that Robert had inherited his father’s illness. This began his lifelong battle with the complications of not only rheumatoid but also psoriatic and spondylitis ankylosis arthritis, which he developed in his mid-twenties (Gilbert, Excuses 39). Rheumatoid arthritis is a systematic disease that affects the whole body, causing inflammation of the membrane lining of the joints and causes pain, stiffness, and swelling. Also, it destroys the cartilage. The joint then loses its shape, resulting in pain and loss of movement (“Rheumatoid). The psoriatic arthritis eventually covered Gilbert’s whole body and caused him to develop

thick, white scaly skin that shed with almost his every move. (Incidentally, my mother still occasionally reminds me that after taking Rev. Gilbert home in our car one day, I asked with the inquisitiveness of a three-year old, “Mommy, why does Rev. Gilbert have dandruff all over his body?” It was a good thing that Rev. Gilbert loved children and had a good sense of humor because my mother said he simply laughed. She said he even mentioned the incident the next Sunday at church, causing the whole congregation to laugh.) As a result of these diseases, not only his spine, but every joint in his body eventually became fused. His hands became bent back in an awkward position and his elbows were so stiff that he could not raise his hands to his mouth to feed himself. Since Gilbert tried to remain as independent as possible, he helped his wife design long-handled utensils by taping sticks to regular-sized forks and spoons. These allowed him to reach his mouth.

In spite of his numerous trips to the hospital, enduring many serious surgeries, Gilbert refused to “sit down.” How was Gilbert able to put aside his pains? What made him so determined when many other healthy and capable people sat idly by? “God says, ‘You can!’ God says you can do anything. There is nothing on this earth strong enough to hold you back from what you can do for Him... my life has tested the limits of God’s strength and power... Whatever he puts in your heart to do—you can do it!” (Gilbert, Excuses 11) While attending Baylor, Gilbert accepted his call to the ministry. “Robert believed that if one had faith and a belief in God, there was no excuse for people not attaining any goal they set for themselves.” (Gilbert, Numbered v) In addition to becoming a pastor first at a church in Bremond, Texas, later Chilton, Texas, and finally at

the Carver Park Baptist Church in Waco, Gilbert continued to seek leadership roles in the community.

In 1976, Gilbert was the first African American elected to the Waco Independent School District Board during the period that Waco schools integrated. Gilbert found this work very stressful as he spoke out against the hiring practices and unfair treatment of minority faculty and students. “My work on the school board was only one part of that overall movement which took place during the 1970s for black people to come into their heritage in this country. It was a slow and painful process, and I think I was involved during the time that change was most difficult for everyone. (qtd. in Barcus) Before he resigned in his 1979, Dr. Emma Harrison, a retired educator, became the second black elected trustee. In his resignation letter, Gilbert stated, “Proposals have been submitted, requesting the adopting of an affirmative action program for hiring, a comprehensive study of student suspensions, the adoption of a remediation program for teachers, and most recently, a proposal for affirmative action in the hiring of coaches.

“Since the board has ignored these proposals and has shown an attitude that is not consistent with the betterment of the educational conditions of the students, I have decided that I can best serve my community as a private citizen.” (Wigger) However, Gilbert’s efforts were not in vain: during the next term, the district hired its first black coach.

In his autobiography, No Excuses Accepted, Gilbert says, “During the 1970s I felt that I was called to a ministry similar to the ideals left to us by Martin Luther King, Jr. I patterned by ministry after him, dealing with issues without injecting any violence, and going in the name of the Lord to raise the consciousness of people who needed to be

changed.” (Gilbert, Excuses 99) Undoubtedly, many people felt Gilbert was taking some very aggressive actions for an African American during that period. Both of my parents were young adults during that time. Having grown up in Marlin, twenty-eight miles southeast of Waco, they recalled that some members of the white community were upset about Gilbert’s outspokenness on injustices that he had either encountered or observed. In fact, in 1977, like King, Gilbert’s house was bombed. In a telephone conversation on February 18, 2002, I spoke with Elwayne Gilbert, Robert’s widow, about that incident. “Robert was speaking out on some very controversial issues during that time, and many people were angry. We never found out who was responsible, but we strongly feel that it was the work of the Ku Klux Klan.”

During the seventies, Gilbert hosted a weekly television program called Minority Forum on which he and his guests talked about issues involving the minority community. In 1979, he organized an action group that led to the hiring of Waco’s first black news anchor. Gilbert also served on the advisory board of the McLennan Community College Nursing School, the United Way Budget Committee, Mayor’s Commission for the Handicapped; he and founded the Crime Commission of Waco while serving on the Human Resource Committee.

While Gilbert’s body grew weaker, his church, Carver Park Baptist, continued to grow. The membership grew from only sixty-three members in 1977 to more than 350 members by the mid-1980s. “He preached and sang of the goodness of God in spite of his physical adversity. His life was a testament of hope for those individuals bereft by disease and difficult physical conditions, but more so, his service to others in spite of his condition encouraged and inspired the lives of many well-bodied individuals, too.” (Gilbert, K) Over-

all, Gilbert was hospitalized more than fifty times; and he endured heart surgery, abdominal and colon surgery, bone and joint surgery. He even had surgery to install a pacemaker. He also had no vision in one and eventually developed glaucoma in his “good” eye. Yet he continued to visit hospitals, nursing homes and private homes; performing marriage ceremonies, counseling and other tasks. In fact, my mother shared that he was my first hospital visitor on the day that I was born!

My parents joined Carver Park Baptist after moving to Waco in 1978. From 1979 until 1988, my dad was a deacon and my mom was pianist for the male chorus and “tot” choir. Since my dad was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis when he was twenty-five, he identified with some of Gilbert’s health concerns. This common bond created a special relationship. When “Rev” needed a “listening ear,” he called my dad. In the summer of 1987, our two families took a tour through all of the southeastern states, visiting state capitals, historically black colleges, MLK’s home in Atlanta and the Washington, D. C. Gilbert said he just wanted this experience with his family. My parents still treasure the memories of that trip.

In 1980, Gilbert fell down several steps, fracturing his leg and dislodging his artificial hip joint. After that, he was confined to a wheelchair. However he continued his ministry and community activities from his wheelchair. His wife and two sons, deacons and friends assisted him. In No Excuses, he says, “If God can use my pain and my frailty to convince others of His power, what more can I ask?... God said, ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor. 12:9). He showed me that ‘I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me’ (Phil. 4:13)” (10).

Realizing that there were more barriers to break through, in 1987, Gilbert joined

with another Wacoan, Curtis Gentry, to challenge Baylor football coach Grant Teaff to consider hiring Baylor a black assistant coach. At that time forty-five percent of the team was African American. Although some people in the community disagreed with Gilbert's approach to the issue, a survey of the black players indicated that they wanted a black coach. (Hill) The following fall, Baylor's football staff hired its first black assistant.

It is apparent that Gilbert was as tenacious as a pit bull and as fearless as a lion. In his own words, "I'm a person that's fearless when faced with situations because I've learned that fear and faith cannot occupy the same space." (Gilbert, Excuses 92) Admitting that during the 1970s he was sometimes bitter during his "fights" with the school board, he said his faith helped him to overcome that. "To those who continue to feel that I am still bitter, I want to say to them that I am no longer bitter and angry. I am known as a rather gentle person when I am acting in love toward those who are in need. I still have that side of me that refuses to compromise. I think God requires of everyone the very best that is within them. I advocate 100-percent Christianity, just as I advocated 100-percent justice during my period of community involvement. (Barcus)

In September 1988, my family moved to Oklahoma. That same year, Gilbert published his first book, No Excuses Accepted. Waco's school board voted to place a copy in every school in the district. In 1989, Gilbert retired from Carver Park Baptist Church as his health continued to decline. On nearly every trip home, we visited with Rev. Gilbert, who sometimes was bedridden for weeks at a time. Unbelievably, not only did he conduct personal counseling from his bed, but also from 1990 until 1992, he hosted a radio program called "Walking by Faith." Gilbert asked Luther Mitchell, Jr. to furnish the equipment from his recording studio. Mitchell even recorded one of his broadcasts from Gilbert's bed

at Hillcrest Hospital. Mitchell said, "I found myself meeting some of the most influential, dynamic and well-read ministers, city officials, politicians, etc,...in Central Texas. He always introduced me to his guests as his technician, and I was very proud to be. He was always very cordial to me and to all with whom he spoke. He would not bite his tongue on any issue." (Mitchell)

In 1992 Gilbert finished When Your Days Are Numbered, with L. Katherine Cook, a community activist, just prior to becoming gravely ill. It was published by Cook and his wife Elwayne in 1993. Cook actually met Gilbert in 1996. "He was that minister whose majestic singing voice had caused me to visualize someone who looked more like William "Refrigerator" Perry, and had amazed me when I turned around to see Rev. Gilbert's diminutive figure."(Gilbert, Numbered xii-xiii)

"On the evening of Wednesday, November 11, 1992, Robert's family watched the struggle between life and death. Lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and a great storm came. Lights flickered out at Providence Health Center and over the city of Waco as God received the soul of Robert Gilbert into His kingdom. At last, Robert had now received sweet peace and rest." (Gilbert, Numbered v)

At his funeral on November 14, my family was among the more than one thousand mourners who heard Rev. Fabian Jacko say, "Gilbert was a man who had achieved many firsts. Even in his death, Gilbert is still first...this is the first funeral ever held in Waco Hall (located on Baylor University's campus)." (Jackson).

In 1996, Gilbert's youngest son, Kenyatta (now a minister and theological doctoral student at Princeton University), graduated from Baylor. Gilbert's daughter Evangeline now lives in Florida with her family; his son Ja Ja and his family live in

Houston. Elwayne Gilbert still carries on some of Gilbert's outreach ministry in Waco. Gilbert's sister, LaRue Gilbert Dorsey, continues his bible study ministry at the Freeman House. Two memorial scholarships and a youth community center bear Gilbert's name.

Robert Lewis Gilbert was a small man whose legs did not work. But he took giant steps in Central Texas.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Brooks, Robbie. Personal Interview. 4 January 2002, 15 January 2002

Ms. Brooks is a childhood friend of Robert Gilbert and was a member of Gilbert's church, Antioch. She gave me insight on his personality as a child before the diseases started affecting him. She also helped me to contact other sources for interviews.

Dorsey, LaRue Gilbert. Personal Interview. 4 February 2002, 25 February 2002

As the oldest sibling, Mrs. Dorsey shared more information about Gilbert's boyhood days and how it was to grow up in the Gilbert household. She also helped Gilbert through college. As a teacher, she was also helped him during his teaching days. She gave me an explanation of the Freeman House bible ministry which Gilbert started and that she continues to carry on.

Garrett, Gail. Personal Interview. 15 January 2002

Mrs. Garrett was a close friend of Robert and Elwayne Gilbert. Also, she was the director of music at Carver Park Baptist Church. She gave me insight on Gilbert's love for music, his singing and his favorite songs.

Gilbert, Elwayne. Personal Interview. January, February 2002

Mrs. Gilbert provided various articles and copies of books, telephone numbers and names of persons to interview. She also gave me her support for this project.

Gilbert, Kenyatta. Personal Interview. January, February 2002

We corresponded both by telephone and email. He shared some personal notes that he had written about his father that he hopes some day to publish. He was very encouraging and provided a number of personal stories that he remembered about our fathers' relationship.

Mitchell, Luther. Personal Interview. 6 February 2002

Mr. Mitchell helped me to understand how he was able to set up the equipment over Rev. Gilbert's bed for his radio broadcast. I also wanted to hear of his experiences with Gilbert, since he was rather young in 1990 through 1992.

Gilbert, Robert and Nancy Barcus. No Excuses Accepted. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988

Reading this book was my inspiration for undertaking this project. These are the words of Gilbert himself. My memories were those of a little girl fascinated by the “little man in the wheelchair.” This book provided another perspective. Each feat seemed incredible, which made it difficult to decide what to leave out.

Gilbert, Robert and L. Katherine Cook. When Your Days Are Numbered. Waco: Cook/Gilbert, 1993.

From the contributions made in the introduction by Gilbert’s wife, friends, children and grandchildren, I was able to feel the dynamic impact of Gilbert’s life and how he affected people in all walks of life.

Stewart, Alva and Charles. Personal Interview. January, February 2002

Although I have spent endless hours interviewing my parents over the last two months, I have listened to many accounts of Rev. Gilbert’s countless quests throughout most of my life. I was compelled to write about Gilbert because of the way his life paralleled with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Secondary Sources:

Baker, Eugene W. To Light the Way of Time. Waco: Baylor University Press, 1987.

I wanted to know more about the history of Baylor—how it was established, who was involved with deciding on its integration, and the general climate of the community. This book gave me insight on some of these issues.

Barcus, Nancy. "In Spite of Everything." Baylor Line. March 1988: 11-12.

It was important for me to read material that was covered from a variety of sources. I wanted know how writers from Baylor's school magazine would approach stories on Gilbert. This was a supportive and inspiring article that highlighted his first book.

Brown, Don. "Black Heritage Week Emphasizes Unity." The Lariat. 9 February, 1988: 3.

This article covered Gilbert's first speech at Baylor for Black Heritage Week.

Camp, Ken. "Handicapped Pastor Accepts No Excuses." Broadman Update. Nashville: 9 February, 1988.

It was quite significant to discover from this article that the school board, which had fought Gilbert on many issues, voted to buy books for all of its schools.

Gines, Sandra. "No Excuses." Waco Tribune-Herald. Morning Ed.: 4C. 10 November, 1988.

This article helped me to return to important passages in the book for details.

Harmesen, Debbie. "Historic Alumnus, Pastor Dies Wednesday" Lariat. 12 November, 1992. 1A, 6A.

This article provided great details about the services. Since I was quite young at the time, I did not recall most of the details.

"History of Waco." [http://www.rootsweb. Com/~txmclenn/wacohist.htm](http://www.rootsweb.Com/~txmclenn/wacohist.htm)

It was important for me to see how the African American community was represented in early years of Waco.

Jackson, Bechetta. "Gilbert's Funeral a 'Victory' Service." Waco Tribune-Herald. 1A.
15 November, 1992.

This was a great article about the service.

Hill, Jerry. "Emotions Mixed Over Coach Issue." Waco: Waco Tribune-Herald. 15 March,
1987.

This was one of Gilbert's most controversial actions.

"Psoriasis." National Psoriasis Foundation. <<http://www.psoriasis.or/b300htm> Jan. 15, 2002.

A professional article about the disease.

"Rheumatoid Arthritis." Aventis. << <http://www.pub.rheumatoid.arentis.com/default>. >

A professional article about the disease.