

Gilbert Lindsay: Rose From the Bottom of the City to the Top

Began Career as Janitor, Helped Create Renaissance

by Steven Wolf

Gilbert Lindsay was a legend in his own time; he just happened to outlive it.

Hence the councilman's death last week at the age of 90, following a heart attack on Christmas day, was received by his friends and constituents with as much relief as sorrow.

His decline began after he suffered one stroke in 1986 and another one last September. He was mute in his final days, and paralyzed from the waist down, losing weight everyday.

Political observers expect a frenzy of political activity, now that Mr. Lindsay is gone from the

scene, as would-be successors to the Ninth District seat emerge to file for candidacy.

Cherished by the city's black community as the first man to break the color barrier on the Los Angeles City Council, Mr. Lindsay had become for some an object of ridicule by the end of his life. After 27 years on the council, there were those who said he was an out-of-touch relic who wouldn't let go the reins of power.

He exceeded the age of the second oldest legislator in the history of Los Angeles by 11 years. For the last decade, he made news more for his personal antics than for his role in governing. A small

man, not much over five feet tall, he would show up at ground breakings in the central city, grab the nearest pretty woman and pose for the camera, saying things like, "I like big things, big operations, doing things in a big way."

One time, he refused to pay a parking ticket given his driver because he was on official business. After several days, a mystery man in blue came forward to pay it off.

Another time, Mr. Lindsay chastised the city council for being gutless, because they were afraid to grant themselves pay raises. On several occasions the councilman's

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campaign finances were investigated, and once he was scrutinized for a conflict of interest regarding government funds given to his wife Theresa for an Easter Day Parade.

Having lorded over the multi-billion-dollar revitalization of Downtown, he was fond of saying, "I can have \$250,000 on my desk in 10 minutes if I want it."

Out of Touch

After 1986, when Mr. Lindsay suffered his first stroke, the amount of governing he actually did dwindled. He delegated most of those responsibilities to his two chief deputies, Bob Gay and Sal Altamirano.

He had also lost touch with the Ninth District's disparate constituency, which covers some of the wealthiest parts of Downtown and some of the poorest in South Central. By the time of his death, his unabashed embrace of Downtown growth on the largest scale possible was viewed by some as being out of step, at least in style if not in substance, with City government's new managed-growth consciousness.

There are those who said he was also out of step with his home com-

munity of South Central, where almost all of the district's voters actually live. The effect of mass migrations from South Central to the west side in the 1960s and '70s hit hard in the '80s, when South Central emerged as an economic disaster area.

A self-made man, Mr. Lindsay's patriotism, work ethic and penchant for conformity suddenly appeared antiquated to some in a community of mass unemployment and boarded-up homes. The councilman wouldn't support gun control legislation, despite chronic drug dealing and skyrocketing violence on streets surrounding his old-fashioned bungalow on 52nd Place near Avalon Avenue.

"I am a liberal, but I am not a phony," he once told a reporter. "I haven't gotten so liberal that I can't enjoy Old Glory as my flag and country."

Mid-Age Horatio Alger

It was easy to see how Mr. Lindsay would have identified so closely with traditional values. He was always being rewarded for them, even if the rewards took many years to come. In fact, he was what one might call a middle-age Horatio Alger.

Born in Mississippi at

the turn of the century, Mr. Lindsay moved to Los Angeles in the '20s, taking a job as a janitor for the Department of Water and Power. In the '30s, he began taking civil service exams, and by the end of the decade he was hired by DWP as the City's first black clerk. The other clerks wouldn't sit next to a black man, so they built Mr. Lindsay an office in the basement. From there, he involved himself in politics, learning the ropes of a City department and running his first campaigns.

By World War II, Mr. Lindsay had become a fixture on the black political scene. When Kenneth Hahn, then a professor of history from Pepperdine, ran for city council, Mr. Lindsay became his operative in South Central. They were introduced by Mr. Lindsay's stepson, Herbert Howard, who was studying with Hahn at the time. It was the beginning of a fruitful political relationship that sometimes transcended politics.

In 1952, Hahn ran for Los Angeles County Supervisor, with Mr. Lindsay helping to deliver the black vote. In return for his help, Hahn made Mr. Lindsay a deputy, the first black deputy to a supervisor in the history of Los Angeles.

When Councilman Ed Roybal was elected to Congress in 1963, the Ninth District seat opened up. The black civil rights movement was growing, black population in the City was rising and Mayor Sam Yorty was un-

der pressure to push for a black man in the job. Then police officer Tom Bradley was being considered for the seat. But at the behest of Hahn and Yorty, the Council appointed Mr. Lindsay. Later that year, he won an election for the seat, sealing his future as one of the city's bona fide black patriarches.

Years after becoming one of the City's true power brokers, Mr. Lindsay could still be heard echoing his humble past, sometimes with bitterness, sometimes with melancholy.

"I used to scrub toilets for the City of L.A. with a mop," he said in 1975 profile story in the Los Angeles Times. "That was my job. I had so many toilets to clean every night. I was a janitor. I had the lowest job you could give a human being. When you are the toilet cleaner as a janitor, you are the lowest."

Mr. Lindsay was challenged in his political career several times but he was never defeated, winning on average 85 percent of the vote. The community always supported him. Once, in the early '70s, a small, informal recall movement sprouted, but after one meeting with the councilman, the problems were resolved.

Outlandishly confident in his power base, Mr. Lindsay used to taunt his opponents by encouraging their opposition. He sometimes even contributed to their campaigns. "You can have a thousand votes," he would say. "You can have three thousand votes. But I'll get my 85

percent."

This came from a man who did minimal campaigning in the last decade of his life.

"Gil just hit the hot spots," said David Henry, a one-time political opponent who later became Mr. Lindsay's friend. "He didn't have enough energy to really campaign. But he didn't have to."

There were questions about Mr. Lindsay's energy level, even as far back as the '70s. In council chambers, when he wasn't on his feet orating, he was nodding off in his big, leather easy chair. In either mode, however, he always managed to entertain. At his 80th birthday, he drew a 30-second standing ovation from a packed house in City Hall, when he agreed to "bet any of you over 50, \$50 that I can beat you over 50 yards."

As an old man, Mr. Lindsay had become a caricature of himself, and some of his opponents labeled him an Uncle Tom. All it took was a hasty look at the rich and the poor in his district to suggest the charge. It seemed that white Downtown gorged at the City's trough, while black South Central starved.

That interpretation of Mr. Lindsay's career, however, ignores two separate attempts in which the councilman tried to steer large-scale government investment into the southern portion of his district. The first time was in 1963, when \$500 million in Housing and Urban Development funds were made available for the neighborhood's redevelopment. Mr. Lindsay was rebuffed. Residents, fearful of losing their homes to condemnation, protested on the council floor, killing the project.

"I think that really hurt him," said Gay, who worked in the councilman's office for 17 years. "He was very embarrassed by it."

A similar effort by Mr. Lindsay in 1967 to redevelop a community called South Park in South Central also failed as a result of local opposition. There

were, however, individual projects that succeeded, such as the Theresa Lindsay Senior Citizens Center on Central Avenue, named after Mr. Lindsay's wife, who died in 1984.

Ladies' Man

Mr. Lindsay was reported to have loved his wife a great deal. Friends of the councilman say he was never the same following her death. However, it was almost universally acknowledged that Mr. Lindsay was quite the ladies' man—right up until his final stroke.

His relationship with Juanda Chauncie, a woman less than half his age, was a source of gossip and controversy in and out of City Hall in the final years of his life. Mr. Lindsay's friends say he exhausted much of his savings, in fruitless attempts to please his beautiful temptress. News reports said he turned over his property holdings to Chauncie, and friends of the councilman have questioned his awareness of the transactions.

Mr. Lindsay's stepson, Herbert Howard, filed a lawsuit against Chauncie to reclaim the property. Several people close to Mr. Lindsay, who watched the deals happen, said unsuccessful attempts were made to separate the two.

"When people tried to talk to him about Miss Chauncie, Gil used to say, 'You need to pay for a woman who looks like that,'" said one of the councilman's few companions at the end.

Despite his efforts, Mr. Lindsay ended up spending much of his last years alone. While Howard worked in his office, they were reported to be somewhat estranged. And although Lindsay had a step-daughter, Sylvia Thornton, she lived in Chicago.

One Downtown hotelier remembered finding the councilman standing on the street in front of his establishment early one evening, his government car and driver parked nearby. When he asked Mr. Lindsay what he was doing, the councilman boasted that he was waiting for his girlfriend to arrive, and that they planned to dine in the hotel's restaurant. The pair chatted for a while, until the hotelier had to leave for a cocktail party. When he returned a couple of hours later, Mr. Lindsay was still there, looking dazed and confused.

"Mr. Lindsay, are you sure you have the right date," he said. "Maybe you should go home."

After waffling for several minutes, Lindsay acknowledged that he might have the wrong date, got back in his car and left.

