Opening doors, inspiring generations

BY JIM NOLAN • Richmond Times-Dispatch


Over the past 25 years, the significance of that accomplishment has not diminished.

Wilder has been credited with being a pioneer who bridged the racial divide in the nation’s highest elected offices and blazed the trail that made President Barack Obama’s historic 2008 election possible.

But those who know Wilder believe the real impact of his achievement extends beyond a single moment, an entry in a history book. Still vital and civicly engaged at 84, Wilder insists his history is still a work in progress.

“I’m still trying — still working — still trying to be certain that I am that person that I strive to be, and chose to be,” he says.

History can be unkind to history makers, especially when the thing for which they are remembered is so monumental that it masks the talent behind it, or the achievements that follow.

“Anybody who makes history, it’s sort of a trap,” said Paul Goldman, a former Democratic Party of Virginia chairman and a longtime Wilder adviser who helped engineer his historic gubernatorial victory.

“It’s pretty hard. You say, ‘What am I going to do to beat that?’”

Indeed, Wilder’s legacy may have been limited to the powerful symbolism of his 1989 election were it not for how he ran — and how he governed once he took office — though the former governor credits others for his election.

“It was not an achievement of mine — that’s an achievement of other people — they did it,” he said during a recent interview in his modest office at the Virginia Commonwealth University academic program that bears his name.

“I couldn’t do it by myself. They put me in the position to do what I did.”

Goldman remembered how Wilder reached out to all corners of Virginia in his grass-roots run for office and ultimately won them over.

“The unique thing about Wilder is that he trusted the average person in Virginia more than his peers in the Democratic Party, who didn’t think the average person would judge him on merit,” Goldman said.

Wilder said he had no doubts he could lead. He had been elected lieutenant governor, served 16 years in the state legislature and distinguished himself as an Army sergeant in combat in Korea, earning the Bronze Star. But he knew others had doubts.

“I’ve never believed people are inherently racial,” he said. “I really don’t see people as white or black or colored, and I don’t see myself that way.” But Wilder said he knew that he “needed to take the case to the people.”

As Wilder’s term began in 1990, there was also much work to be done — a state in tough financial straits that needed to be managed well — and a widely held fear among the white establishment that the new governor might not be up to the job.

“Many white Virginians feared the commonwealth’s new chief executive would spend freely, add taxes and mainly appoint African-Americans to office,” said Larry Sabato, director of the Center
for Politics at the University of Virginia.

"In fact, Wilder governed as a tax-averse fiscal conservative whose appointments, while more diverse than his predecessors, weren’t at all out of the mainstream.

"As the first (elected) black governor, he set the precedents and dispelled some preconceptions held by many voters. His governorship made it easier for other African-Americans to be considered on their merits rather than being seen mainly through the prism of race."

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**Wilder's career in** elective office peaked with his gubernatorial term. A bid to secure the Democratic nomination for president in 1992 barely got off the ground. He mounted an independent campaign for U.S. Senate in 1994 but dropped out in September and later endorsed Sen. Charles S. Robb, the Democratic incumbent. Wilder did not hold another elective office until winning the race for mayor of Richmond in 2004.

But his greatest impact arguably extends beyond his vote-affirmed titles, taking shape instead in the development of subsequent generations of government leaders and public servants, inspired by his example, some even before he rose to national prominence by winning the executive mansion.

"He inspired me to become a lawyer," said Judge Roger L. Gregory of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, who in 1972 was a student of Wilder’s in his Virginia State University course in constitutional law and civil liberties.

In an interview, Gregory said Wilder was "like a father" to him. "I learned at his feet."

Gregory later became Wilder’s law partner at the firm Wilder, Gregory and Martin, located in Richmond’s Church Hill neighborhood, and he supported Wilder in his run for governor.

They had a saying: From Church Hill to Capitol Hill is a short distance, but it’s a steep climb.

Wilder, said Gregory, made the climb because he “believed in the common good of people,” and his message that talent and leadership could come from all types of people resonated in Virginia and beyond, and still does.

Gregory, who received a recess appointment to the federal bench from President Bill Clinton in December 2000, was renominated by President George W. Bush and confirmed in 2001.

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Wilder was also a mentor to former Richmond Police Chief Rodney Monroe, hiring him to police the city shortly after Wilder’s election as mayor.

Under Monroe, the city’s violent crime and homicide rates dipped dramatically, aiding a resurgence of the city through effective public safety and community policing.

Monroe, now the chief of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina, said Wilder taught him about leadership.

“He really helped shape me as it relates to empowering people to go out and do something that needs to be done,” Monroe said.

“He had a vision — he wanted a safe city, and he instilled a great deal of confidence that if you believe something is right, you don’t allow detractors and others to keep you from doing things,” the chief added. “Don’t let them block and tackle you — you have to move past that.”

Outside of his immediate circle, Wilder’s election also inspired others to dream big.

Michael Rao was a student when Wilder took the oath of office as governor in 1990. Now he is VCU’s president, presiding over a sprawling academic institution and hospital system that has helped remake the city and emerged as an economic driver in the region.

Before Wilder’s election,
“most of what we saw was leaders who did not look like Governor Wilder,” Rao said. Afterward, “I really did think to myself that maybe any of us can now be in major leadership posts in our country.

“His election made clear that there was an opportunity now ... and that led others to take on visible public roles.”

Wilder’s legacy endures in VCU’s L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, established in 2003 under Rao’s predecessor and Wilder ally, Eugene P. Trani.


The school has awarded more than 4,000 bachelor’s degrees and an additional 2,000 graduate and doctoral degrees. Minority students make up nearly 43 percent of the student population.

“Our student population really does look like the future of America, and is the future of America,” said Rao, who said Wilder’s story and presence on campus carry influence.

“He has the power to make an enormous difference in students who really are the future of America.”

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Despite the potential and promise of Wilder’s achievement, and his subsequent impact on future generations of leaders, history has produced few who have been able to follow in his footsteps.

“It’s still tough for African-Americans to get nominated and elected to state governorships,” said Sabato, noting that Deval Patrick of Massachusetts is the only other black gubernatorial candidate to win since Wilder.

David A. Paterson of New York, who had been lieutenant governor, served as governor from 2008 to 2010 after Gov. Eliot Spitzer resigned in a prostitution scandal.

In November, Maryland Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown, a Democrat, lost a bid for governor to a Republican, Larry Hogan, making Hogan only the third GOP governor of the heavily Democratic state since 1966.

“I’ve always said being No. 1 is no good unless there’s a No. 2,” said Wilder, who is close with Patrick and has a picture of the two-term Bay State governor hanging in his office.

“I don’t think people look to the color of a person’s skin first to determine how they are going to vote,” he said. And he added that in Virginia, “those barriers that previously existed do not exist today to being elected. The biggest problem people have today is money — that means anybody running today,” he said.

Some say Wilder’s success had more to do with his people skills and the time in which he ran, conditions that cannot be easily duplicated personally or politically.

“He just had incredible people skills and incredible political skills, and that period of time was perfect for somebody like him,” Goldman said.

“You can’t get people to accept history unless they are willing to accept history, and timing is essential,” he added.

But Wilder’s victory, he said, “demonstrated that society is open ... that it can be done. And that is a very liberating thing.”

Said Gregory: “We’ve still got a ways to go, but we’re much further along than that road thanks to his incredible ability and passion for social justice.”

Gregory said Wilder’s legacy boils down to the “promise of America” laid out by the nation’s founders. “He represented that for everyone.”

Wilder “changed the way that millions of people look at their politics,” Gov. Terry McAuliffe said at a recent VCU-sponsored gala honoring the former governor, thanking him for his friendship and advice over the years.

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Wilder suggested that the impact of his achievement is best determined by the people who were affected by what he’s done in his career as a civil rights lawyer, a state lawmaker, a lieutenant governor, a governor, Richmond mayor and teacher.

“I don’t think we can afford to be the historian of our own times,” he said.

But when pressed, he cites embedding the so-called “rainy day” budget revenue reserve fund into the Virginia Constitution as an accomplishment that “helped more Virginians across the board” than any single piece of
legislation in which he was involved.

He also said the unplanned interactions he has with his students who engage him in conversation, or adults of myriad backgrounds who come up to him and tell him how he was their first vote, or their first political contribution, “are the most rewarding things.”

There are, of course, the planned meetings and visits. Aspiring political leaders in the state and throughout the country come to Richmond to seek Wilder’s advice and endorsement as a senior statesman who rose out of the segregated South to claim a unique place in history.

Wilder said he did not go into politics to help himself — “I had a heckuva law practice,” he says — but did so to involve more and different kinds of people in politics and the decision-making that governs the country.

He doesn’t want them to follow in his footsteps. “They should follow in their own,” he said. “The longest journey you ever take in life is the journey to self, and it’s the most difficult journey.”

At 84, Wilder said he enjoys a measure of comfort with who he is, but he said he is still on the road to fulfilling his legacy: through teaching and with the establishment of the National Slavery Museum project that has been in the works for years.

“That’s something that is going to happen,” he promised.

As for what happened 25 years ago, “I am not satisfied that it’s sufficient,” the former governor added, “because there’s still a lot of work to do.”

Journey helped take politics and society beyond ‘the prism of race’
In July 1984, then-state Sen. L. Douglas Wilder of Richmond announced his bid for lieutenant governor, and in the 1985 election, he defeated Republican John Chichester. Wilder has taken a keen interest in the development of subsequent generations of leaders.
In January 1970, two senior members of the state Senate — Dr. J.D. Hagood of Halifax County (far left) and M.M. Long of Wise County (center) — greeted Richmond's L. Douglas Wilder, the chamber's newest member. Wilder had won a special election the month before to succeed J. Sargeant Reynolds, who was to be sworn in as the state's lieutenant governor.
In January 1990, thousands of spectators crowded Capitol Square in Richmond to witness the historic inauguration of Wilder as the 66th governor of Virginia.