Shame & dignity;
Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin embraces her father's rocky past

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Body

Shirley Franklin sees two conflicting images from her childhood.

One, captured in a favorite photograph, shows her at age 3, her tiny hand tucked safely into her father's. He looks sharp in a fedora and double-breasted tweed overcoat, Shirley's pretty young mother by his side. He is a newly minted lawyer; his lips curve in a knowing smile and he stares at the camera as if he sees the promise ahead.

The other image is a mental picture that Franklin carries from her teenage years: Walking out the front door one morning, she finds a man sprawled on the ground. She has seen him drunk in the streets before. "Dad's down here sleeping on the steps," she yells back to her mother. She steps over him and goes to school.

As a young girl, Franklin watched alcohol rob her father of his career and his marriage. It also stole the father she wanted and needed. His story --- one of failure and redemption --- shaped the woman who three years ago became mayor of Atlanta.

Her father's long journey back to dignity helped her overcome her own shame. Over the decades, she reconciled those two images of him. Now his story is her inspiration as she seeks her place in history.

Franklin wants to be remembered as more than the "sewer mayor" --- a technocrat who spent billions to fix pipes and water treatment plants. She wants to end homelessness in Atlanta.

She knows firsthand that middle-class lives can veer off course, that the thousands of people who live on Atlanta's streets once had aspirations of their own --- and maybe even promise.

For most of her life, Franklin stayed silent about her father's alcoholism. She "held it all in," hoping to hide his condition from her friends. The confident young lawyer in the photograph? That was not the father she knew. The promise drained away by the time she was 5.

A daughter's shame

Eugene Haywood Clarke Jr. had seemed destined for success. A Philadelphia native and child of divorce, he had studied his way into Howard University in Washington. He shone at the largely black college, and went on to its law school, graduating with seven others in the class of '43.

While there, he met a student at a nearby teachers college named Ruth Lyons, and they married. He took her to Philadelphia and promptly passed the bar exam. Their only child, Shirley, arrived on May 10, 1945. By the time she was 3, he had purchased a share in a downtown office building and opened a small practice. He and the other two owners set their initials in copper in the tiled foyer.

Then he fell apart.

Ruth White traces her first husband's decline to an event that she believes shook his confidence. He was ambitious, full of pride --- not one to expect failure. When friends nominated someone other than him as president of the local branch of the NAACP, he fell into a funk.

He drank scotch in college, but not enough to worry Ruth. Now he was coming home drunk. Within about two years of his office opening, at least 10 clients complained he had taken their money but done no work. He admitted in court to taking $800 from them, and in the fall of 1950, at age 30, he was disbarred.

Five-year-old Shirley, a tomboy in pigtails, watched her father's decline. He still fulfilled some of the timeless roles of a father, teaching her to ride a bike. But she also remembers his friends carrying him into the house too drunk to walk.

When Shirley was about 9, her mother sent her to visit family in Washington for the summer. The tension between her parents had been building. Her father was unemployed and drinking with people her mother didn't know. One morning, around 3 o'clock, he had awakened Ruth and demanded she cook breakfast for him and two drunken strangers.

At summer's end, Shirley came home to a new apartment. The old furniture was there, but her father wasn't.

Shirley's new home was nine blocks from her old life, her friends, her grandparents and her dad. Ruth soon divorced Eugene Clarke, but allowed him to visit their daughter.

He took Shirley to Easter dinners, celebrated her birthday and took her to the cinema to see the black actor and social activist Paul Robeson. Shirley enjoyed these outings --- when he arrived sober. Often he did not.

One day she spotted him sleeping on the sidewalk, in a tweed coat and penny loafers. She crossed the street to avoid him.

After she started high school, she distanced herself emotionally as well. She says he was drunk when he accompanied her to freshman orientation. Thereafter she wrote "father, deceased," on the form for the school directory.

"I just wanted to erase him from my life because it was too painful," Franklin recalls. "I mean, how could someone with so much potential, how could someone who had done so well against so many odds, not conquer this problem and make my life perfect?"

A man redeemed

Shirley was 19 and married when her mother called with the news: Your dad is in the hospital; you need to visit him. Eugene Clarke was in critical condition, with tuberculosis of the liver and an abdominal inflammation.

Shirley, by then a student at her father's alma mater, went to see him. He was motionless, unable to speak. She was at his side when blood began to trickle from his mouth and nose. Nurses and doctors bustled into the room.

It was the summer of 1964 --- 14 years since he'd lost his law license. At 43, he had been on the streets about a decade.

He survived, spending two months in the hospital without liquor. Upon his release he joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and swore he'd never drink again.

When Clarke's friends in the legal community realized he was serious about recovery, they found him a job as a probation officer in juvenile court. When his daughter wanted a divorce, he found her a lawyer.

In 1968, four years after his hospital stay, Eugene Clarke petitioned for return of his law license. More than a dozen influential people --- seven judges, a congressman, a councilman, two assistant prosecutors, a lawyer and the director of the juvenile court --- testified in his behalf. The record of that hearing calls Clarke "neat and well-groomed," a top-notch probation officer and "industrious, reliable and possessed of high intelligence."

The court returned his license, and he opened a law office across the street from Philadelphia City Hall. At 47, Eugene Clarke started over.

When his daughter finished graduate school in 1969, he paid for a grand graduation gift: a trip to Africa.

Three years later, at age 26, she remarried. Over the next six years she and David Franklin had three children, and each summer she brought her growing family to Philadelphia.

Eugene Clarke was prospering, gaining the respect of other lawyers. In 1980, Pennsylvania Gov. Dick Thornburgh appointed him to fill a vacancy on the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas.

Franklin watched him take his oath of office. "I felt happy for him and relieved for myself," she says. "He was the person that I'd wanted him to be."

The next year he was elected to the bench, and then rose to become one of a handful of judges assigned only homicides, the most high-profile cases.

Franklin and her father developed a quiet relationship. They would sit together for hours, reading books and exchanging few words. They did not talk about his alcoholism until she was in her 30s, when he found the courage to say he was sorry.

She told him an apology was unnecessary, but he insisted it was.

Indeed, this was Step Nine in the 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous program, to which he had become devoted. Clarke eventually graduated to the final step, which asks recovering alcoholics to spread the word to other alcoholics. He spoke regularly at AA events.

Speaking at a 1983 event sponsored by a Philadelphia area hospital, the 62-year-old judge said he'd started drinking when he was 14. His addiction had hurt his career and his family, he said, especially his daughter.

"I have a daughter whom I love very much, and I was ashamed of myself --- but not sufficiently ashamed to stop drinking," Clarke admitted, according to The Philadelphia Inquirer.

"Fortunately, it did not ruin our relationship, because her mother . . . told our daughter she shouldn't judge me, that one day she would see the man that her mother had married."

While her father was presiding over a courtroom, Franklin was taking over day-to-day operations in Atlanta. Mayor Andrew Young, elected in 1981, made her his chief administrative officer.

Franklin says she told Young about her father's troubled past. A parent and ordained minister, Young urged her to share the story with her own children. They needed to know the truth, he said.

Adopting a cause

Soon after she told her children, she also told her father's story to a few others, including Bill Bolling. The former soup kitchen director had been pressing Young and Franklin to help the homeless. Bolling, who'd founded a food bank before Young's election, says he was moved by Franklin sharing the story, but found that she wasn't "enthusiastic" about spending city money on homelessness. Atlanta business leaders feared that free food and shelter would merely attract more homeless people, he says.

"I would have to say, the initial response was not, 'OK, what do we have to do here?' " says Bolling, the executive director of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. "It was more negotiated."

But two decades later, when Franklin ran for mayor, she recruited Bolling and others to educate her about the issue. Bolling says that as mayor, Franklin became what she couldn't be as a bureaucrat: an advocate.

"In her role as mayor, she's done something that has been tremendously important: She put it at the top of her agenda," Bolling says. He calls Franklin a "moral leader" on the homeless issue.

At her urging, the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta convened a commission in 2002 to study the causes of homelessness and find solutions. In 2003 the group handed Franklin its "blueprint" to end homelessness within a decade.

The report offered 29 proposals. It called for studies of the barriers to employment and the best way to return prison inmates to the community. It recommended more public toilets, shelters and transitional housing.

Franklin then asked the panel to raise money for the work. So far, the Regional Commission on Homelessness has gathered more than $16 million from private sources. Some of the money is paying for the 24/7 Gateway Center, an around-the-clock shelter and homeless service center to open in June in an old city jail south of the downtown business district.

There are critics. Anita Beaty operates a homeless shelter in Midtown and runs a service center and referral agency called the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless. She says Franklin is pushing homeless people away from downtown. She's heard Franklin tell her father's story and says it's a "gimmick to convince the public that she has the best interest of homeless people at heart, but that's not borne out by her policies."

Martin Moeser is among Franklin's supporters. The executive director of the Resource Opportunity Center, a nonprofit homeless service center near downtown that will expand into office space at Gateway, says Franklin understands the homeless and has a good plan to help them. "I wonder, if her father hadn't experienced homelessness, how close she'd be to the issue," he says.

A life embraced

In 1998, Franklin got a call from her father, who was vacationing in France. He said he'd been hospitalized for a heart condition but was doing fine. Acting on instinct, she boarded a plane and by the next night was in his hospital room.

He was surprised she'd come, and insisted he was OK. He suggested they tour Europe together.

That night, after she left the hospital, he died.

At his memorial service at Philadelphia City Hall, she spoke publicly for the first time about her father's past. She avoided the word "alcoholism," but those who knew him well did not question what she was talking about: Her father's life had shown her that you can make a mistake, and it doesn't have to be the end of the story. You can start over.

Then, last year, Franklin gave a state-of-the-city address to hundreds of Atlanta's business and civic leaders. She began with the standard encomiums and recounted her success in funding a multibillion-dollar sewer overhaul.

About 10 minutes into her speech, she began using words like "God" and "poverty." She said that while most Atlantans enjoyed a good quality of life, 6,000 people, maybe more, had spent the night on Atlanta's streets. She removed her glasses and, without expression, her voice firm, said the federal courts had forced the city to fix its sewers but no one would compel Atlantans to help their homeless.

"So what is it that we must rely on?" she asked, sounding like a minister. "We have to rely on our faith. We have to rely on what's inside. We have to remember our values. We have to remember that if it were not by the grace of God, we might be in that condition. We have to remember that we can't do it alone, that we have to do it together. We have to remember that we really don't know why people are homeless --- all we can do is help."

Then she told the crowd about her father.

Franklin said everyone knew someone, a friend, a family member, who had suffered a similar addiction. "So I am asking you to tap into that, whatever that story is for you, and find a way to do more."

People who remember Franklin as a bureaucrat use words like "unflappable" and "unemotional" to describe her, but those who were there that day recall looking around the room and watching tears flow.

As a child, she was ashamed of her father. But now, as a grandmother nearing 60, she takes pride in his story, and calls it her inspiration.

The beauty of her father's life, she says, "is the triumph over the problems, not the dismissal of them."

When he was alive, Shirley Franklin's father traveled to AA meetings to share his story.

Now it is hers to tell.

Graphic

KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff The mayor gets a tour in January of an Atlanta Community Food Bank warehouse from director Bill Bolling. He calls Franklin a "moral leader" on homelessness. ; TY TAGAMI / Staff Behind Ruth White, the mayor's mother, is the Philadelphia office building where Eugene Clarke opened a law office soon after they wed.

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