



Willie Lightfoot - “Keeper of the Avenue”

by Patricia Jackson

Willie has been honored, recognized and applauded for his voice on the welfare of our children, the economic growth of our community and the empowerment of community leaders within our community to be able to make decisions that govern us.

For 37 years, he has been a part of the South West community. In our children, he sees tomorrow and believes with proper spiritual and educational guidance they will emerge as the new leaders of our community.

Jefferson Avenue is his “Dream Street” and through the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s, he’s been Jefferson Avenue’s Keeper.

Willie came to Rochester in the 50’s and lived at 379 Jefferson Avenue where he attended Madison High. His parents were migrant workers and he too worked in the fields picking apples and potatoes. He gained recognition in High School as a team player, a silent leader, as he participated in the football and basketball sports. He was a 1954 graduate of Madison High.

The rest is history. Our “Keeper’s” profile includes, but is not limited to, the following:

1963 - 1968

Worked at Xerox’s Webster plant as a manufacturing machine operator.

1967

Vice President of ABC.

1968

At the age of 28 he became the President of ABC. As President, he said and I quote, “I didn’t take the job for the

money, there’s no money in it, what black people need is more important than the dollar, knowledge, pride, things that can’t be taken away.”

In 1968 he opened a shop at the corner of Prospect and Troup St. called The House of Black Beauty. Inside were earrings, bracelets, and medallions designed by his partner, Ms. Mollie Hampton.

He joined with a group of young black adults to form the Westside Varsity Club, a group that shared information on issues affecting the inner city. One of the club’s first efforts was to work with a group of 14 and 15 year old black students. He said, and I quote, “We want to explain the problems they’re going to be faced with and help the prepare themselves. We want these kids to have something to aim for, a goal in front of them; we can show them this. And they’ve got to know they’ve got to stay clean if they’re going to reach that goal!”

In 1970, Willie was the President of the People’s Club and from the club he fostered a spirit of dialogue and friendship among men and women whose backgrounds may differ but who cared about improving the quality of life in their community.

In 1982, he worked as a community organizer at the Montgomery Center and later in 1976 he was one of four who organized The Third Ward Area Neighborhood Association which was renamed a few years later to the South West Area Neighborhood Association which is presently the Executive Director.

In a 1982 Upstate Article entitled, Dream Street, Willie is quoted as saying, “I’m not trying to sound funny, but I think about myself when I hear a preacher say he was called.” I feel like I was called by the people to help this community. Whenever I go someplace that’s a better place, it motivates me to come back and try to make this a better place.”

As printed in the SouthWest Community News, February 1996