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Recommended Citation:

Houseal, Willie H., "Three decades later, individuals recall changing the area's voting system,"
February 24, 2013. Box 1, Folder 3, Houseal Collection, Valdosta State University
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Three decades later, individuals recall changing the area's voting system

Dean Poling
The Valdosta Daily Times
Feb 24, 2013



Tony Daniels, Lewis Gordon, Wanda Denson and Dr. Willie Houseal recall the effort 30 years ago to change Valdosta's election system.

Dean Poling / VDT
The Valdosta Daily Times



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Thirty years ago, Valdosta had 20-plus miles of dirt roads predominantly in black neighborhoods, no black representation on City Council, County Commission, or the school boards, and the black community faced a city plan to close a fire station on the south side of town.

In the early 1980s, there was no James M. Beck Overpass bridging the railroad that separates the north and south sides of town, which was once the traditional divide of white and black Valdosta respectively. Then, if the station closed, a slow-moving or stopped train would cut off the southside from fire protection.

With no black members on City Council and an election system that made voting for a black council member almost impossible, some in Valdosta's African-American community felt as cut off from city government as the southside would be cut off from fire protection if the fire station closed.

At the time, all Valdosta City Council members were elected at-large, meaning whoever received the most votes filled the council seats. With all of Valdosta able to vote for its representatives, each of the council members arguably represented all of Valdosta. But with all of the council members being white and living in the northside of town, the southside's black population felt their interests weren't being represented.

And under the at-large system, the black community found it nearly impossible to elect an African-American council member. There had been the exceptions. Ruth Council had been appointed to an at-large City Council position then was elected to a term as the lone African-American council member under the at-large system, and Clayton Barron had been appointed to a term on the Valdosta Board of Education, but these situations were more anomalies rather than a trend of electing more African-Americans to office via the at-large system.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the moment when several of Valdosta's black residents took action to ensure the city's African-American population would have more equitable representation in Valdosta and Lowndes County's seats of government.

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Last week, The Times met with a handful of the architects who led to Valdosta's move from being an at-large system to the current system of districts. Dr. Willie Houseal, Tony Daniels, Wanda Denson, and Lewis Gordon were among several people who initiated the efforts to change the system in 1983.

Gordon led the Valdosta NAACP chapter during this era. — was also involved in the NAACP and began noticing the inequity in the city's representation. Through conversations with Daniels, Iris Dubard and others in the early 1980s, they realized their individual difficulties were not personal but rather social. Based on this new understanding, they created the Winnersville Coalition Consultants, with the mission of acting "as vanguards toward correcting some of the ills of our community," — notes in "The Power of Positive Self-Esteem," a book which is part memoir, part self-help primer.

"The organization's first mission was to conduct research on the political structure to determine if something could be done about modern day taxation without representation," Houseal writes. "This problem was obvious because there were approximately 40 percent minority/black residents living in Valdosta. However, there were no minority/black representatives on the City Council, (Lowndes) County Commission, nor the boards of education on the city or county level."

There had been the exception of Ruth Council and Barron, as well as a couple of appointments to various boards, but otherwise, no equitable representation for the black community, say —, Denson, Daniels and Gordon.

The southside fire station issue edged the Winnersville Coalition, the local NAACP and other individuals from discussing concerns to acting upon them.

Houseal mentions presenting to City Council a study regarding the southside fire station's importance. They were joined by other groups: Citizens Awareness, the Ministerial Alliance, the Black Citizens Action Group, etc. But Houseal credits Georgia Legal Services as providing the pivotal support in creating political change.

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Georgia Legal Services helped shape the federal court case that eventually became plaintiffs Lowndes County Chapter of the NAACP, Winnersville Coalition Consultants, Jeffrey R. Perry, Wanda Denson, Robert L. Banks, Onnie Phillips, John Carter and Anna M. Tyson vs. Valdosta Board of Elections and the Valdosta City Council.

The suit claimed the at-large system of having no residential requirements to elect six council members and a mayor had been established in 1963 to "ensure that areas having higher concentrations of black population are thrown together with areas having low concentrations of black population. This method of elections dilutes the voting strength of black citizens."

Federal Judge Wilbur Owens presided over the case. Twenty-two months of deliberations led to a compromised settlement.

"The method of voting would be changed from the at-large system to wards and districts, with three black districts for City Council, one black district for the County Commission and four black districts for the Valdosta Board of Education," according to "The Power of Positive Self-Esteem." Three decades ago, few black students attended county schools so the county school board was not considered at issue in 1985, Houseal says.

The compromise included another change within the City Council structure. The council took its present form: mayor, six district council members and one at-large council member. Houseal says some of the suit's allies were not pleased with keeping one at-large council member, but he says compromise was essential to change. Compromise made change possible, and those changes have been impressive through the years.

"We were changing the status quo," Houseal says, "changing the climate of this community, the political climate."

With the new system in place, a special election was held Feb. 14, 1985. Three black City Council members were elected to office. They were Houseal, Bunnis Williams and Joseph "Sonny" Vickers. Donald "Butch" Williams, Minnie Martin, and Jacqueline "Jackie" Brown

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were elected to the Valdosta City Board of Education; Willie Jones was later elected to the school board's Super 4 District. Alvin Payton Sr. was elected to the Lowndes County Commission.

Jet magazine featured the Valdosta-Lowndes County election. Several national news organizations reported on the election.

With the change in the election process came changes within the black community. Within a matter of years, all city streets were paved. Other infrastructure changes came.

Hiring, training and promotional changes came. Daniels shares a story of being excluded from a promotional possibility within the fire department. He mentioned it to Houseal, then an elected City Council member; by the next day, Daniels was included in the process.

There were unexpected turns. The overpass, for example, ensured trains would not isolate the southside from the rest of town, but the construction period killed many of the black businesses located within the overpass' shadow, Houseal says.

Houseal was elected, then stepped down to take a job with the Brooks County School System. Following Houseal's resignation, Willie Rayford became the district's representative.

In discussing the changes within the past 30 years, they say there have been many positive changes, but they would still like to see more African-American department heads within city government.

In the coming months, Denson says she hopes to organize a reunion or event to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the effort to change the voting system.

They laugh recalling some of the events and episodes from the early 1980s, though Gordon says, "We weren't laughing then."

"We knew there was the possibility something could happen to us personally," Houseal says. "But we weren't afraid of it."

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During the suit, few people had heard of the Winnersville Coalition Consultants; the group had no phone or address. But people knew the NAACP and it did have a phone numbers and an address.

As NAACP head, Gordon bore the most animosity in terms of negative letters or threatening phone calls. He recalls going to the police department with threatening letters and being told the police would be unable to investigate the anonymous threats because too many people had handled the letters. So, the letters were never even taken into evidence.

Asked if they felt the lawsuit was essential, if they thought years later, the political change would have come as a natural progression, or black representation would have eventually increased through the at-large system, Daniels, Denson, Gordon and Houseal all agree the suit was essential.

As for the rest of the question, they all agree again. Asked if change would have come without the lawsuit, they answer in one voice, with one word. No.

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