



Earline Parmon, left, shares a laugh with Denise Hartsfield and Larry Womble during a news conference in front of the Forsyth County Board of Elections in October 2002.

Parmon

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ments are a reflection of the respect Parmon has already earned in Raleigh.

"She has distinguished herself among the freshman class. She is very tenacious. She is very concerned and very dedicated to people in her district," he said. "She is going to be even better in the years to come."

From the grassroots

Parmon is no wine-and-cheese politician, a fact of which she is proud. Working for those on the bottom of the societal totem pole is in her blood. Parmon was roped into political involvement before she could even vote. Local labor and civil rights champions Mazie Woodruff and Velma Hopkins took a teenaged Parmon under their wing. Hopkins and Woodruff recruited Parmon to be the first black co-chair of the Forsyth County Parent-Teacher Council when Parmon was 18. That led to Parmon taking an active role in voter registration and precinct politics. She was in college when she and others decided that they wanted to recruit a black candidate to run for alderman in the mostly white Southeast Ward.

"Someone told us about a schoolteacher who lived in Skyline named Larry Womble. So I gave him a call," Parmon recalled. Womble was reluctant at first, Parmon said, but agreed to run. The race was so tight it led to a runoff. Womble eventually lost, although four years later he would win the seat. The loss was a tough lesson for Parmon but one she believes she needed to learn.

"It was an ugly, ugly campaign," Parmon said. "I got my first lesson of what real campaigning was like."

As Parmon's political star rose, so did her visibility in the Forsyth County Democratic Party. She was chosen to be a delegate at national conventions, and in the early 1980s, she did the unimaginable by becoming the first African-American chairman of the county party. But Parmon's elation over making history was short-lived. She fell out with party bigwigs because she says she refused to hold her tongue and merely play the role of the party figurehead.

"People who elected me thought that I could be told what

to do and how to do it," she said. Parmon was asked to step down, but she refused. Although she is still a loyal Democrat, she admits the party lost a bit of its luster for her after the incident. She thinks the local party has never been all too enthusiastic about her as well. Parmon served 12 years on the Board of County Commissioners without ever facing any real opposition in elections. Her primary and general elections for the House in 2002 were wake-up calls.

"I knew I was not the favorite in the House race of the party structure or of the business structure. My support has always come from the grassroots level," she said.

Battle lines

Although she was an active participant in local politics for more than three decades by the time she was elected to the Board of County Commissioners, Parmon said she never wanted to be a candidate.

In her mind, she was an activist. She liked knocking on doors and getting others excited about issues and candidates. Politicians, she thought, were cut from a different mold than she.

"I have been known as one that did not girdle my speech. I would call it like it was, which was not necessarily a good attribute for running for public office," she said. "I felt that people who got elected compromised too much."

Parmon said she learned when to speak up and when to extend a hand of compromise. She recalls her political battles as vividly as any decorated general. But she said she knew which battles to fight and when to lay down her weapons. Lessons in compromise came her first week on the Board of County Commissioners, when she held back her vote for board chairman for the Republican who would agree to push through a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

The fighter in Parmon is still very much alive. She has been perhaps the member of the Black Legislative Caucus that has been most critical of Gov. Mike Easley's refusal to even discuss the possibility of a death penalty moratorium. Easley has denied requests by the caucus to meet and discuss the topic. Parmon has said publicly that black voters should not forget about the governor's reluctance when

they cast their ballots in November. Parmon said getting a moratorium passed is more important to her than stepping on the very big toes of the governor.

"To some people it may be a political risk, but I think at times integrity is more important than political risks," she said. "This is an important issue to step out front on."

Like Easley, Parmon also will be on the ballot in November, trying for the first time to win re-election to the House. Her general election in 2002 was especially nasty. Her Republican challenger, Vernon Robinson, attacked Parmon on many fronts, including LIFT Academy, the charter school Parmon founded and ran for 15 years. The school shut down in 2000 when its charter was yanked by the state's Office of Charter Schools.

As Robinson pounded away, Parmon, the lifelong fighter who rarely held her tongue, did something uncharacteristic: She held still, refusing to do what she called "gutter politics."

"I just did not feel I wanted to win at any cost," Parmon said. "People know me. I have been a public figure all my life. I go to church here in this community. I shop at the East Winston Food Lion. My kids went to church here."

Womble said Parmon won fans and votes by keeping on the issues and away from a political fight.

"You have those people who are doomsday sayers and skeptics, but she has proven her critics to be wrong. She rose above all of that. She met those issues head-on. She did not try to run or escape," Womble said.

Parmon — a wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother who turned 60 in November — said there is no room in her heart to hold hard feelings, not even against Robinson and the Democratic Party.

"There are no permanent enemies, just permanent interests," she said.

Although she has grown from a naive teenager with political stars in her eyes to a seasoned politician who knows how to get things done, Parmon is not ready to proclaim that she has come full circle. She says she is still learning and working on issues that will have a real impact on the people of the 72nd District and beyond.

Bryant

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Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, was established as part of the N.C. Judicial Reform Act last year.

The financing act stipulates that each individual contribution from at least 350 voters cannot exceed \$500. Bryant's total fund-raising, which must be completed by the May 4 primary, cannot exceed \$66,000. She also will have to abide by other fund-raising and spending restrictions, including not receiving money from political action committees (PACs), which are the vehicle many organizations use to participate in the political process at the local, state and federal levels.

This new campaign finance process changes the method of electing judges on the state Court of Appeals and Supreme Court to nonpartisan elections.

Bryant has been an appellate judge since being appointed by Gov. Mike Easley in 2001. She became the first woman and the first African-American prosecutor for the 13th Prosecutorial District in 1982 when then-District Attorney Mike Easley

appointed her to the position. "We are elected by the people, and while I've been fortunate to have two consecutive appointments, that is very unusual," Bryant said.



Butterfield

In 2001, Bryant was one of three black judges



Biggs

Bryant suffered a disappointing loss to Judge Ann Marie Calabria in the last election despite receiving more than a million votes. Gov. Easley reappointed

Bryant to a seat before she left the court. Biggs and Butterfield also lost their races.

"It's important to have diversity on the court. There are two black judges on the Court of Appeals, and we now have none on the state Supreme Court," said Bryant. "We have so many diverse cases coming up to the Court of Appeals, and I think it's helpful to have a diverse panel of judges to hear the cases. I think that's a part of equal access to justice."

Running a statewide judicial campaign, said Bryant, poses many challenges such as getting her name and face out to voters in all corners of the state. After the last campaign, she said, many voters in Wake County didn't even know that she was black.

If her campaign ends up to be a success and she remains on the court, Bryant wants voters to know that she will try to make a difference.

"I've been a public servant for most of my legal career. I've always worked hard at every task before me and I continue to work hard on the Court of Appeals and I will work hard as a candidate," said Bryant.

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