

Wilson Riles: 'Reinventing the wheel'

avis Campbell recalls the time years ago when the late Wilson Riles shared an elevator with a fan who spoke gushingly of his admiration for the tall black man and his rise from poverty to become California's state superintendent of public instruction. "I've always been an admirer of yours, Mr. Bradley," the man said.

Bradley, as in Tom Bradley, the first black mayor of Los Angeles.

"He just quietly turned and said, 'Thank you, I'm Wilson Riles,'" recalled Campbell, now executive director of the California School Boards Association and a former deputy of Riles, at Riles' funeral last month in a packed Sacramento church. Trapped in the elevator with his terrible *faux pas*, the man was mortified. "But Wilson reached over, touched his arm and said, 'That's okay, I get white people mixed up too.'"

It was vintage Riles, defusing a tense encounter with humor and good will.

Despite his hardscrabble beginnings in the Louisiana backwoods where he was born — the only child of parents who died when he was a young boy — Riles learned early how to get along. Taken in by friends of his family, he attended Elizabeth Colored Elementary School in tiny Elizabeth, Louisiana, where the principal, F. Paul Augustine, believed education was the only way up and out of poverty, whose tiny school produced many teachers, a New York doctor, a playwright, an Arizona state senator — and a California state schools superintendent.

There was no high school in Elizabeth, so the extended black family at the African Methodist Episcopal Church raised \$40 for young Riles to buy a suit and a bus ticket to New Orleans. There, he attended a black high school and lived with an elderly man in a one-room shack, supporting himself by delivering milk from 2 to 7 a.m.

"This was a time when for 15 cents you could buy a plate of beans," Riles later recalled.

After high school, he moved with his foster family to Flagstaff, Arizona, where he worked construction jobs and met a teacher, Cleo Murdock, who helped him apply to Arizona State Teachers College (now Northern Arizona University). He earned his way through college working in the student infirmary.

"Up to then, I didn't think white people had any problems whatsoever," he told me in a 1981 interview for *The Sacramento Bee*. "I thought they spent all their time hating me."

He became a teacher, and a principal, first in a one-room school for the children of black millworkers in Pistol Creek, Arizona. He earned a master's degree and went to work for the California Department of Education in 1958, working his way up to director of compensatory education, responsible for managing major infusions of state and federal funds to help low-income children. He insisted minority and poor children be held to the same standard as other kids — taking enormous heat in 1977 when, as a member of the University of California Board of Regents, he voted to raise academic standards.

"Wilson's vision was not only ambitious, but he implemented it, and California education was forever transformed," Gary Hart, Governor Gray Davis' education secretary, said at Riles' funeral. "His legacy is that public education be inclusive, that all children be treated with respect."

After he was defeated in a bid for a fourth term by Bill Honig in 1982, Riles started an educational consulting firm in Sacramento, working until shortly before

he was hospitalized in January with the lung infection that killed him April 1 at age 81. He spoke often in his later years of how educators tend to "reinvent the wheel," failing to learn from past mistakes. As Davis embarks on one of the most ambitious education reform efforts in the state's history, there are lessons to be remembered from the Riles years.

"Americans keep looking for that one button, in education or elsewhere, they can push to make everything right," Riles said in that 1981 *Bee* interview. "The fact is, there are no simple answers. These are difficult times — financially and socially. Kids are confused. Their parents are confused. It all requires a mutual effort among parents, teachers — and kids, who too often are not consulted — to get it moving again." 🏠

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