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Kim Bracey makes history in town with a troubled past

Woman becomes first black to be elected mayor of York, Pa.

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YORK, Pa.

- Motorists honked and shouted congratulations to Kim Bracey as she crossed tree-lined South George Street one crisp morning this week.

Bracey made history Tuesday when voters elected her the first black mayor of York, a city with an ugly racial past. Forty years ago, a black woman and a white police officer were killed as riots convulsed the city, but it took decades for anyone to be brought to justice.

Now here was Bracey, officially mayor-elect, waving to well-wishers. Her walk Wednesday took her to a meeting with Robert Simpson, a mainstay of the black community and her mentor. They embraced, and he told her: "The whole of York is proud of you."

"Oh, my gosh," she said with a radiant smile, "it really is a good feeling."

"Enjoy this part," Simpson counseled. "The honeymoon is not going to last long."

Bracey, 45, knows he's right. York faces acute financial problems. The struggling city of 40,000 due north of Baltimore is in such a pinch that the departing mayor, John Brenner, has said he might ask Pennsylvania for emergency aid.

Worse news might be looming. Harley-Davidson, just outside the city, says it will decide by year's end whether to move 2,500 well-paying motorcycle manufacturing jobs to Kentucky.

Given all that, plus the city's entrenched poverty, crime and other challenges, Bracey says she isn't focused on race relations - and wasn't when she courted voters during the campaign.

"When I knocked on their doors, it didn't matter that I was an African-American woman," she said. "They wanted to know what I was going to do about the police and community relations. Or, 'What are you going to do to bring my taxes down?'"

Still, Bracey, the city's former community development director, says she is proud to be York's first



black mayor. Many here recall a time not so long ago when York simmered with the kind of racial tension usually associated with the old Deep South.

"It's very humbling - and truly significant to so many people," she said of her win. "How so? So many folks did not think they would see that. York still experiences its areas of racism and inequality in a number of areas. We've made progress, but we have some work to do."

Bracey beat three white candidates in May to gain the Democratic Party nomination. With Democrats outnumbering Republicans 3-1, she was expected to coast in the general election, and she did - racking up three of every four votes cast. Her Republican opponent, Wendell Banks, also black, was criticized for waging a tepid campaign.

Bracey's election comes as York's changing demographics have cut the sway of white voters, who make up 60 percent of residents. White flight, going back decades, helped nudge the black population to 25 percent. And there has been a Latino influx: Hispanics of any race account for close to a quarter of the city's population, according to census estimates.

"It's more than just numbers; it's attitudes," said William J. Althaus, mayor from 1982 to 1994. "There is a bit more openness, which does not mean that everything is rosy in terms of race relations."

Bracey needs to guard against high expectations in the black community, Althaus said. "People may say, 'OK, now our sister is mayor, everything is going to be better.' She is very circumscribed by what she can deliver just by the realities of the budget."

Some backers see her success as a potent symbol even as they discount race's role.

"Kim did not win because she's black," said Eric Menzer, an ex-Marylander who is white and works for Wagman Construction in York. "I think Kim won because she was the most qualified candidate that appealed to the broadest range of people."

Bracey drew support from neighborhoods across the city and from the business establishment. Her finance chairman is Tom Wolf, head of the Wolf Organization, a prominent distributor of building products.

Menzer sees "special significance" in electing a black mayor. But he said it's not as if York had a "lily-white government structure" up to now. "We had a black school board president 10 years ago," he said. "We had black City Council members 20 years ago."

North of downtown, with its mix of banks, government offices, shops and empty storefronts, Zulioka Woodard was cutting hair at the Friends salon the day after Bracey's election. Woodard was proud that a woman won. She also liked seeing a fellow African-American on top.

"At one point, we were not allowed to do certain stuff," she said, referring to racial bias. "As long as she gets the job done, that's what matters most. It's good to see things are changing, for the better."

But Salon owner Rhon Friend - who styles Bracey's hair - had mixed feelings. To him, the "color issue" overshadows the fact that she is qualified for the job.

"All the emphasis that we now have a black mayor could create an adverse reaction," he said.

The Friends salon sits a block west of the railroad crossing where Lillie Belle Allen was gunned down

by a white street mob just over 40 years ago on the evening of July 21, 1969.

Allen, 27, was visiting family from South Carolina. She and relatives were driving to get groceries when a wrong turn landed them in a hostile white area. Racial tension was running high in York, where three days earlier rookie police officer Henry C. Schaad was fatally shot. Taking the wheel from her sister, Allen tried to drive away but panicked. She was killed in a hail of bullets.

Bracey was 5 years old that summer. She can remember how National Guard tanks clanked through town, how at nightfall her grandmother would shoo her away from windows at her South Penn Street home in case bullets came flying.

"Even at 5 years old, those memories are there," said Bracey, a married mother of two.

But it wasn't until more than 30 years later that anyone stood trial for those killings.

In 2002, a jury convicted two white men of second-degree murder in Allen's death. The same jury acquitted Charlie Robertson of charges that, as a police officer, he gave ammunition to the gang whose members shot Allen. Robertson was York's mayor at the time of his arrest in 2001.

In 2003, two black men were convicted of second-degree murder in Schaad's death.

Four years ago, city officials announced a \$2 million settlement of a lawsuit brought by Allen's family.

After high school, Bracey left York for college and a career as an Air Force sergeant. She returned in 1994 to work for Simpson at the nonprofit Crispus Attucks Association. She guided revitalization efforts along a thoroughfare south of downtown and later ran the city's Department of Community Development for six years.

Bracey said the trials were both painful and cathartic and that "there is indeed healing that has taken place in York City." An annual unity march wends across the city to a hilltop park where "white power" rallies were reportedly once held. There, two benches inscribed with the names of Schaad and Allen face each other.

Not that racism is gone. During the mayor's race, a woman called Bracey's campaign office. She said she'd rather be dead than see a black mayor and hung up.

Bracey points to bright spots in the city, including a new downtown ballpark and loft apartments. But in addition to bleak finances, York is grappling with crime, poor schools and a median income that is among the lowest in Pennsylvania.

More than eight in 10 city school students qualify for free or reduced lunch, noted James DeBord, director of YorkCounts, a consortium of businesses and organizations in wider York County that aims to foster regional cooperation.

YorkCounts is pushing a proposed charter school that would be located in the city and draw students from the city and more prosperous outlying townships, yielding a diverse racial and socioeconomic mix. It would "create an immediate middle class school in the city that doesn't exist right now."

Bracey has already begun preparing for her transition to mayor. She's also savoring the moment. On Election Night a little African-American girl asked for her autograph.

"That sent chills," Bracey said. As she wrote down her name, she asked the girl a question: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Kim Bracey

Age: 45

Party: Democratic

Experience: Director of York Department of Community Development, 2003-January 2009; executive director of South George Street Community Partnership, 1999-2003.

Personal: Married to Vernon Bracey; they have a son, Brandon, and daughter, Arianna

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