

Career marked by integrity

Public officials praise retiring McNair

By **JAMIE KIZZIRE, BIRMINGHAM POST-HERALD** – March 30, 2001

Chris McNair's unexpected resignation Thursday from the Jefferson County Commission might have marked the end of a long public career, but he leaves behind a record of integrity that those who know him say should serve as an example for all public servants.



Staff file photo

Chris McNair stunned many Thursday by announcing his resignation from the Jefferson County Commission.

At a time when the public has become numb from scandals of politicians who have used their positions for their own enrichment, McNair, 75, stands out as a man who always put those he served first.

Friends and colleagues describe him as a leader who promoted racial harmony and wise stewardship in handling the public's money.

McNair resigned from the Jefferson County Commission during Thursday's pre-commission meeting, citing personal reasons. He refused to elaborate after the meeting. He had served on the commission for 15 years and previously served in the Alabama House of Representatives, becoming one of the first blacks to serve in the Legislature since Reconstruction.

But his movement to public life was not an easy one. McNair had first felt the pain of one of the greatest tragedies of the civil rights movement, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. His 11-year-old daughter, Denise McNair, was killed along with three other girls in the Sept. 15, 1963, explosion.

But McNair refused to allow the bombing to make him bitter, friends and observers said. Instead, he moved to heal racial animosities that gripped the community. In the process, he left an indelible mark on Birmingham by reaching out to all races and serving the public with dignity and fairness, observers said.

"The tragedy in his personal life only inspired him to give more to the community," Gov. Don Siegelman said. "He's inspired a lot of young people to examine if they want to participate in politics. He's a great role model."

Siegelman appointed Rev. Steve Small Jr. to succeed McNair. Small is the founder of True Life Missionary Baptist Church in Forestdale.

State Rep. John Rogers, D-Birmingham, also said McNair has set an example. "He's a very ethical person," Rogers said. "He always spoke his mind and is very independent."

McNair's independent and straightforward approach struck a chord with politicians and voters of all races.

"He was able to bridge the gap between the races," Rogers said. "He's one of the few black politicians able to attract a lot of the white vote."

State Rep. Eric Major, D-Fairfield, said McNair served as a role model when he got elected to the Legislature.

"I used his example as a freshman legislator," Major said. "He manages himself with dignity and respect."

As a politician, McNair exhibited the right blend of compassion with a thorough understanding of the issues, Jefferson County Commissioner Mary Buckelew said.

"He was open-minded on issues and willing to listen," she said. "He set the pace for elected officials, not just black elected officials, but all officials."

McNair opened a photo studio on Birmingham's Southside in 1962 after quitting his job as a milkman. His daughters operate the studio today.

Some observers said his business experience helped him develop his conservative, tight-fisted approach when it came to spending tax dollars. It's an approach that other politicians have since used to gain favor.

"His reputation as a diligent steward of taxpayer dollars is one to which all elected officials should aspire," said a prepared statement released by Birmingham Mayor Bernard Kincaid, a close friend of McNair's.

Although McNair's conservative financial approach won admirers, it also earned him some good-natured ribbing from his colleagues.

"He's a penny pincher," Rogers said. "I used to tease him about being cheap. But he's a businessman, and that approach appealed to voters."

McNair, however, was careful about how he appealed to voters. He never used his daughter's death to win votes.

When he ran for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1992, he refused to mention the tragedy, which could have been used to appeal to out-of-state campaign donors, observers said.

Instead, he focused on the issues as he ran against incumbent U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, who had a \$2.6 million war chest. Shelby beat McNair in the party's primary.

"He's a great example of race relations ... and he didn't try to take advantage of it," Birmingham City Councilman Aldrich Gunn said.

Odessa Woolfolk, president-emeritus of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, said, "Chris is interested in seeking the truth and not race-baiting. He's always been a fair-minded individual."

Small gets cooperation vows

Buckelew, Collins pledge to work with Chris McNair's successor

By JAMIE KIZZIRE, BIRMINGHAM POST-HERALD 3-30-01

Chris McNair's successor has some big shoes to fill, but two Jefferson County commissioners say the group will work as a team with the new commissioner.

Chris McNair resigned Thursday from the office he had held for 15 years, citing "personal matters." Gov. Don Siegelman has named Rev. Steve Small Jr. as McNair's successor. Small, founder of True Life Missionary Baptist Church in Forestdale, assumes the position immediately. Small could not be reached for comment Thursday night.

Although there will be a new face on the commission, at least two commissioners said the group would continue to move forward.

"He has some big shoes to fill ... but we will work with whoever is sent to the commission," Jefferson County Commissioner Mary Buckelew said.

Commissioner Bettye Fine Collins agreed.

"I'm sure his successor is a wonderful person," Collins said.

Collins met Small briefly during the March 19 dedication of the Edgewater Oaks subdivision, but did not know at the time that he would succeed McNair.

Birmingham City Councilman Aldrich Gunn, who is friends with Small, said he will be a good addition to the commission. Small is active in the community and has established preschool programs in the area.

"He'll work with them," Gunn said. "He's a man of conviction."

A native of Wilcox County, Small is a graduate of Birmingham Baptist Bible College. He also received a bachelor of arts in religion education from Miles College, according to a statement from the governor's office.

He also has a master's degree in counseling from the the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He currently is workng on a master's degree in public administration.

Siegelman said he has known Small for about three years. Small approached the governor about a year ago about a possible appointment to McNair's position.

The governor met with McNair, who at the time said he was considering stepping down from the commission for personal reasons. Siegelman researched Small's credentials and background, while he waited for McNair to notify him. Small was sworn into office Thursday morning.

"I saw his children's program and day care program ... and after additional research thought he would make an excellent person to begin to fill the shoes of Chris McNair," Siegelman said. "He has a similar personality and will work with them. He will do an excellent job as county commissioner."