

Sharifa Wilson

looks to the future

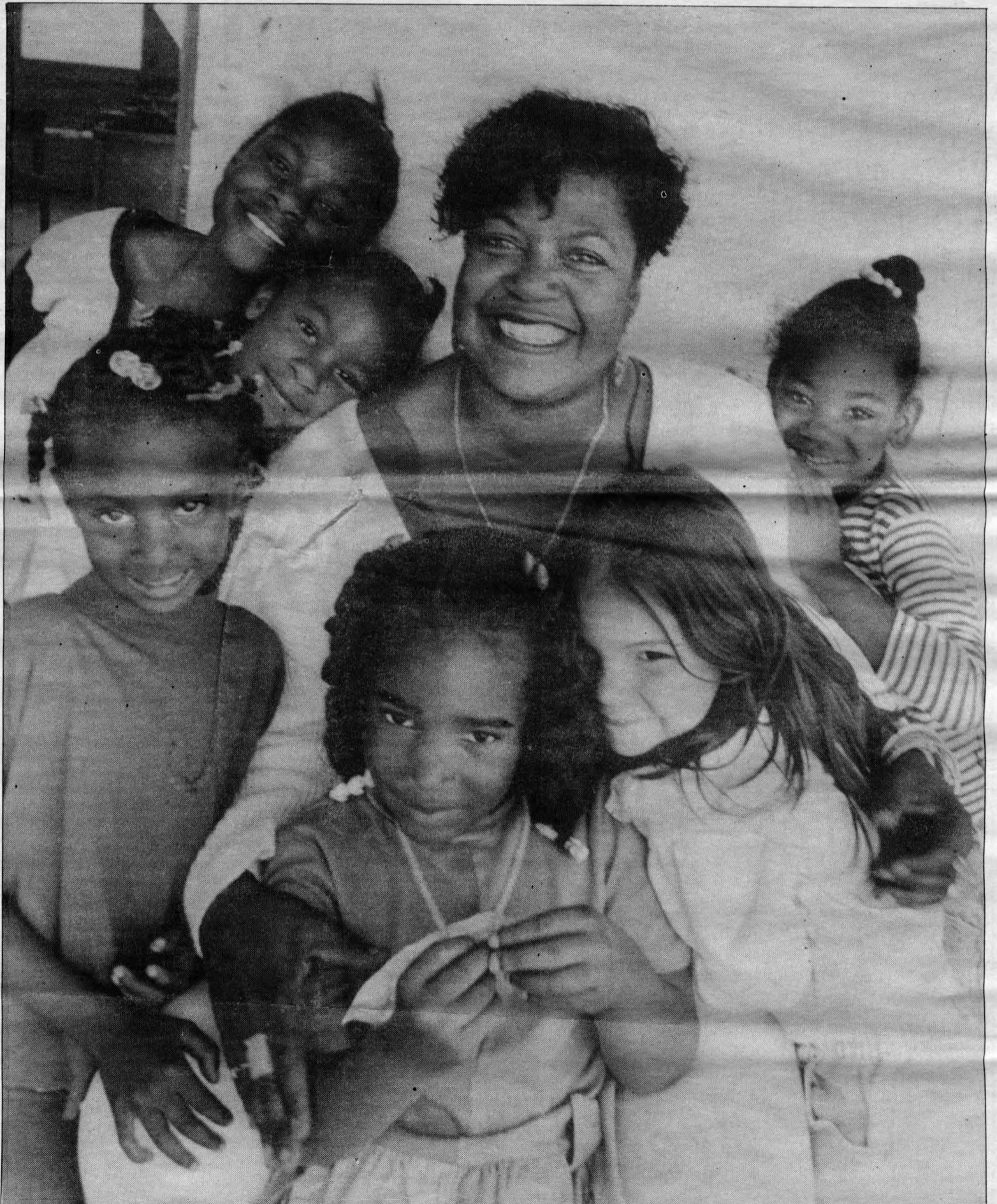
East Palo Alto mayor
is upbeat about
the possibilities
ahead

Sharifa Wilson was elected to the East Palo Alto City Council in 1990 and elected mayor by her colleagues last November.

As mayor, she is helping preside over a time of unprecedented regional cooperation and potentially great change in East Palo Alto. The cities of Palo Alto and Menlo Park, along with San Mateo County and the state, have become partners in an effort to do everything from making the streets safer to increasing job training and economic development.

Wilson, a teacher at an after-school program, has brought both energy and optimism to her job while also realizing the magnitude of the tasks ahead. She and her Council colleagues have established a unity this year that East Palo Alto has never before seen on the City Council, which is what is making the regional cooperation possible.

She talked recently with Don Kazak, the reporter responsible for regular coverage of East Palo Alto in the Weekly.



Sharifa Wilson, who teaches in an after-school program, shares a moment with her students (clockwise from the right) Wynicka Nichols, Monique Ortiz, Crystal Fountain, Ebony Bashir, Ebony Brown and (at top) Kimberly Booker.

photographs by Renee Fadiman



Weekly: This has obviously been a historic year for the East Palo Alto City Council and for the city. A lot of it is happening because of the political harmony on the Council. Why is it happening?

Wilson: I actually think it's happening because we have the right blend of people on the Council now. R.B. (Jones) has been in the community 22 years, Rose (Gibson) grew up here, and (Bill) Vines has been around the community some 25-30 years. Because we have people who are long-term residents there's a stronger sense of commitment to really making the community succeed.

Weekly: Does that imply that previous Council members haven't been such long-term residents?

Wilson: No, it implies they didn't have the same level of commitment.

Weekly: The Council is obviously together right now, but I'm wondering if the Council is a little bit ahead of the community, in terms of the political camps in town. Is there any pressure against this kind of harmony?

Wilson: It's up to the Council to set the tone. It's up to us to be ahead of everyone else. And what we did was agreed to stay focused on the issues. All of us agreed we wanted the city to progress.

Actually, I haven't heard a lot of complaints about the harmony. Most people are happy to be able to come to Council meetings and see a nice group that isn't stressed out because of how people are acting. I haven't had many complaints about how well we're getting along (laughs).

Weekly: Given what's happened since February—you've gotten Palo Alto involved, Menlo Park involved, San Mateo County, legislators, now Governor Wilson. . . Given all that, and given the difficulty of some of the things you're trying to do, what do you think are some realistic goals for 1993? How is the community going to be different?

Wilson: Well, we will have broken ground on something (a new development). What I would like to see is a redirecting of the funds that come into this community to better meet the needs of the people here. I'd like to see a jobs-training program in this community.

I'd like to see several streets paved smoothly, without potholes. I'd like to see the parks being used and having been refurbished.

A nicer, cleaner atmosphere, just in terms of the environment, the appearance of the community.

Weekly: It's almost psychological. . .



Wilson: Yes.

Weekly: This is our place, let's take care of it?

Wilson: Exactly. One of the frustrating things for me, sitting on the Council for two years, was that people didn't have a sense that anything was ever going to change in East Palo Alto. It was always going to be the same in East Palo Alto.

What I really want to show is that something can change. That's why it's important that we deal with this whole issue of the appearance of the community. If they can see something that's different, it will generate some sense that things can change.

Weekly: I'm thinking about young people who use drugs. It's the same kind of mind-set of "let's not worry about tomorrow, let's get high tonight."

Wilson: Yes. "There's no reason for me to finish high school because there will never be a job for me, so why should I?" That's the kind of thing, that cycle, is what I want to break. I want to be able to say to them, "You know what? I've got an alternative for you instead of hanging out on this corner and hustling to sell drugs. Go into this job training program, because we're going to teach you some construction skills. Not only will you be able to use these skills on that project that we're building, but you'll also be able to drive up the freeway and work on the San Francisco Airport expansion."

It will give them some sense of, wait a minute, maybe everything is not bleak, maybe there is a reason to finish high school. That's exactly what we're trying to achieve.

Weekly: You're not just trying to set a tone for the community, but for people's lives.

Wilson: Exactly. We have to break the psychological barrier that prevents East Palo Alto from growing. And part of it is the simple thing of fixing the potholes in the street. One of the weaknesses of the previous Council, in my opinion, was when they came up for re-election, all you had to do was ask, "Well, what's different? What have you done?" People couldn't come up with an answer.

We're concentrating on economic development and trying to create an environment that let's people see that this community is a community where there's hope. You know what? That's a factor that businesses use when they decide to come into a community. What's the aspiration level of the citizens in the community?

That's why I got involved in this in the first place. I was teaching here and looking at the kids and it was like, wait a minute, something is drastically wrong in the community when you can take a child born in this community and they end up shooting their 16-year-old friend they went to school with. Something is wrong, and it's the community's fault.

Weekly: I assume the biggest issues you will deal with in 1994 will be redevelopment. Figuring out how to get some projects on line.

Wilson: Yes. It's a balancing act. The balance to me is trying to accommodate (the developers) and also make sure redevelopment doesn't displace the people who are living here. We have to control that.

Weekly: In what ways is the city still misunderstood by people who don't live here? What stereotypes are being perpetuated in the media?

Wilson: One of the things I would really like to communicate is that the majority of citizens in this community are hard-working people who care about their environment, who care about their families and want a good quality of life.

The perception is that East Palo Alto has a tolerance for crime. That's not true. And the Council has taken the lead on that. It's us that get yelled at, it's us that get the phone calls.

The people of this community want to live in a decent environment. You don't always see that because the majority of population is

always depicted as drug families, but the majority of our youth are not out there selling drugs.

Weekly: If there isn't a tolerance for crime, what does that mean? Are people just quietly frustrated?

Wilson: People are quietly frustrated. People are intimidated.

Weekly: People are afraid of retaliation?

Wilson: People are afraid of retaliation. But the system will support them.

Weekly: Do you think there are racial tensions in East Palo Alto? What has the city done to reach out to Hispanics, to Pacific Islanders or to Vietnamese to try to be more inclusive?

Wilson: I don't know whether the tensions are just based on race, but there definitely are some tensions in the community. It may be more of an issue of old-timers versus newcomers, that kind of a tension, where people see that their block is changing ethnically.

The federal government has even admitted that there is pure, straight-up racial discrimination in the home mortgage market against black families. That's reflected in our community. We see it on our blocks, where black people don't get a chance to buy a house but another race does. That's manipulated by the system. That will result in hostility between the neighbors.

The Latino community needs to develop some leadership and become involved in the system.

Weekly: You don't see any substantial barriers to that process?

Wilson: No, I don't. I think those things can be done.

Weekly: Are you getting any comments from citizens on the regional efforts?

Wilson: All I've gotten has been positive feedback. I think people have come to understand that just because you talk to somebody that doesn't mean they tell you what to do. That's always been the fear.

But I don't have a problem asking for money, or for anything else (laughs). My thing is, tell me no, but I'm not going to be afraid to ask you. ■