

Barbara Mouton

Former East Palo Alto mayor turns over the gavel — but not her convictions

By Mary T. Fortney
Times Tribune staff

Barbara Mouton may not be mayor of East Palo Alto any longer, but she intends to actively pursue convictions that have put her at odds with many of the city's other leaders.

That much was evident last week when Mouton, after serving as mayor since the city's incorporation in 1983, relinquished the reins of the city to Vice Mayor James E. Blakey Jr. Her term on the council

expires in 1990.

It was difficult, said one city resident who frequently speaks before the council, to adjust to not saying "Madame Mayor."

Although Mouton was gracious in turning over the post to Blakey, she, too, found it hard not to be Madame Mayor. She sometimes forgot her new role and occasionally took charge of last Monday's meeting.

Mouton is a complex woman with a strong personality and deep, emotional convictions. Her ardent support for the city's incorporation

and rent controls and her insistence on being selective about development in the city have put her at odds with the anti-incorporation, anti-rent control and pro-development faction in the city.

Those differences also tore apart her longtime friendship with another strong community leader, former councilwoman Gertrude Wilks, who led the anti-incorporation forces.

Some white residents who have appeared before the City Council have complained about Mouton's

pro-black stance. But she stresses she is not pro-black but anti-racism and believes in a "rainbow of color."

Mouton's views were fostered during her childhood in San Francisco and have been deepened by later events in her life.

She was reared in the Diamond Heights neighborhood, where a black family stood out among the German, Italian and Irish residents.

Her father, a mailman, felt deeply the insults he encountered as a

black. She said he would come home at night and vent his frustration by banging things around in his basement workshop. Both parents were members of the NAACP, dating back to 1929.

Mouton, a self-described "cradle Catholic" endured another affront. She said the family was forced out of St. Paul's Catholic Church and instead had to attend St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church.

"Racial discrimination has been

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Barbara Mouton
... no longer Madame Mayor.

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part of my life as a black woman," Mouton said. "Many times I did not get promotions, even though I took tests well."

As a teacher at Ravenswood High School in East Palo Alto in the 1960s, Mouton was skeptical that "integration" had taken place.

"The situation actually was there

were all black and all white classes," she said.

"I suspect you will probably find the same thing in the Sequoia high school district because of the tracking situation," she added.

After Ravenswood, Mouton worked with Wilks at the private Nairobi Day School in East Palo Alto.

She also along the way found time to have seven children and to study English at Stanford Universi-

ty. Mouton and her husband, David, a retired maintenance worker at SRI International, are now separated.

During the period from 1979 to 1982, Mouton helped to organize the East Palo Alto Senior Center and served as its director.

In 1982 she had another blow. In "the only time I've ever been fired," Mouton was forced out of the senior center job. She charges that the ouster was political and

due to her pro-incorporation activities.

"If this is the price I have to pay, so be it," she said at the time, in reporting her dismissal at a League of Women Voters forum.

Mouton served on the East Palo Alto Municipal Council from 1976 to 1983, when the city was still under San Mateo County control. She won the largest number of votes in the City Council election in April 1986, winning re-election to a

four-year term.

Mouton currently is employed at the Community Development Institute (CDI) in East Palo Alto, putting in long hours as a vice president with main responsibilities for information systems and public relations.

Her few moments of free time are usually spent reading, but she emphasizes, "People are my hobby."

One job that's now out of the way

is the chore of writing the Mayor's Letter in the city's newsletter.

Mouton plans to turn her writing talents in another direction. She intends to write a study of black female mayors. At present there are 38 women out of 290 black mayors in the United States, she said.

Mouton also plans to write an account of the incorporation of East Palo Alto. She will have a lot of personal experiences to put into the book.