



Gertrude Wilks . . . East Palo Alto mayor

'I'm a realist'

Mayor applauded as peacemaker

EAST PALO ALTO — When Gertrude Wilks was growing up as a poor sharecropper in Louisiana, her father, a Baptist minister, became well known as a peacemaker in the black community. As she remembers it, he would often sit rivals down together and ask them to work out their differences.

Although Mrs. Wilks' world has changed dramatically in the years since, she has not forgotten that example. As the mayor of East Palo Alto, this imposing woman with the soft voice sees her major role as that of a unifier.

"I come from strong black people," she told an interviewer. "I could never deny that. I think we have dignity and pride. I think we can build. I don't believe that black people have to give up what they have to become like others."

Now 51, Mrs. Wilks has a biography that sounds like a modern-day "Roots."

From the plantations of Louisiana, she married a serviceman and eventually moved to California, where her husband worked for the Ford Motor Co. in Richmond.

When he was transferred to the South Bay, Mrs. Wilks' family joined the growing number of blacks moving into East Palo Alto, a marshy community near the Dumbarton Bridge. In those days, she remembers that "for sale" signs were posted on every other house.

Her interest in education — by which much of the community knows her — was spurred

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when her oldest son graduated from high school without knowing how to read. "That's when I had to come face-to-face with the problem," she said.

From that point, Mrs. Wilks began working to change the school system, organizing a parent group, writing a proposal to use school aides, and bringing pressure on the white principal of Ravenswood High School. In the white community, she had an image as angry black woman.

Finally, deciding that it was impossible to work with the schools, Mrs. Wilks and the group she helped organize, Mothers for Equal Education, began a Saturday tutorial. In 1966, they founded the Nairobi Day School.

Twice ravaged by fire and twice rebuilt, the day schools have come to symbolize black pride and a non-competitive

approach to learning. Although the high school is now closed, the elementary school has claimed substantial success in raising test scores and the self-image of the students.

"Mrs. Wilks is a very gutsy, beautiful lady who has given many black children in East Palo Alto the opportunity to receive a no-nonsense basic education," said Mary Cottrell, the former chairman of the Palo Alto Human Relations Commission.

In politics, Mrs. Wilks' path followed a similar course. Disturbed that the Alto Park Council, the all-white governmental advisory group for the area, was ignoring the black community in the late 1960s, she ran twice and was elected twice as a community representative.

Although she says she was initially denied office on the grounds that the results were not valid, Mrs. Wilks' efforts paved the way for the creation of the East Palo Alto Municipal Council. In 1974, she was elected to the group and in 1976 she was named mayor.

As a leader, she has won accolades for her ability to bring the often-fragmented community together. When the possibility of purchasing Ravenswood High School reopened the long-standing rivalry between the Municipal Council and the Ravenswood Recreation District, she was responsible for bringing the two groups closer together.

Is she a black separatist?

"I'm a realist," she says. "I'm not a separatist. I have some good friends of all races."