

Paterson Ethos: ‘Remember Where You Came From’

The governor and his father leave their mark on political history

By Rochana Rapkins
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Former State Senator and New York Secretary of State Basil Paterson began life on the streets of Harlem as the son of Caribbean immigrants. He earned his pocket money working as a laborer at the Port Authority.



“Being black and growing up in New York City at that time,” he recalled, “the blacks worked for the shipping department and I remember we were paid not to go to the Christmas party.”

Times have changed dramatically. Today Basil Paterson is seen as a significant political figure in the life of his hometown—and he’s the father of the governor, David Paterson. The governor himself has deep roots on the Upper West Side, having represented its upper reaches in the State Senate before being tapped to become lieutenant governor.

Indeed, the family’s history is New York’s history. Basil Paterson enlisted in the army at age 17. After getting his bachelor’s and law degrees from St. John’s, he started a storefront law practice and eventually helped form Harlem’s Gang of Four, a powerful political coalition that included David Dinkins, Charles Rangel and Percy Sutton. He became the first black person to serve in the State Senate, representing the Upper West Side and Harlem. He did this while raising two sons with his wife Portia, a schoolteacher.

“There was no pattern to follow,” recalled Paterson from the office where he has practiced labor law for the last 25 years.

The GI Bill paid his college tuition. Stickball matches covered other expenses—according to Paterson, it was common to bet on the games, and his team seldom lost. If Paterson knew how to work, he also knew how to hustle.

“I played through college, and I played through law school,” he said. “It was something people bet on, and we made money on it.” Laughing as he described how the ball used to hit buildings and ricochet off windows, he added, “There is so much chance involved.”

The man who thrived on games of chance was soon swept up into local politics. As chairman of the Morningside Neighborhood Renewal Council, he got his first lessons about the political process. In 1965, he went on to win a New York State Senate seat and later served as deputy mayor under Ed Koch and New York Secretary of State. Yet he did not forget his roots.

“When you are in office, you represent a community and you have to remember where you came from,” he said.

Paterson speaks with quiet pride about his children. That is true whether the talk is of the governor or his son Daniel who works for the Office of Court Administration.

“We raised our children differently from most,” he said. “David is, of course, legally blind. With David being the person he is, we did our best to treat him like a regular person. We didn’t send him to a special school for the blind.”

David Paterson got an early start on the campaign trail, his father recalled, when he began to campaign on sound trucks, or vehicles equipped with loudspeakers, at age 12. “He always seemed to know more than anyone else,” Paterson recalled.

Asked whether he imagined that one of his sons would follow in his footsteps, he sounded incredulous.

“Follow in my footsteps?” he asked. “He went far beyond my footsteps.”