

OVERCOMING HUGE ODDS

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By Teri Maddox

Growing up poor doesn't deter Mason

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Bill Mason always tells young people, "It's not where you came from. It's where you're heading."

The 74-year-old East St. Louis man can speak from experience. He grew up in the backwoods of Mississippi and attended a one-room school for black children. His parents farmed, hunted and fished to put food on the table.

The family moved to the metro-east in 1940 so Mason and his three siblings could get a better education. His father worked at Commonwealth Steel Co. in Granite City and operated a barbershop in the basement of his home.

"When you came from the South, they always put you back a grade," said Mason, who stuttered as a child, leading Dunbar School to hold him back two grades.

Today, Mason has a doctorate degree in urban education from St. Louis University. He owns one of the largest landscaping companies in the region and serves as president of the Metro-East Black Contractors' Organization.

Mason formerly worked as a schoolteacher, personnel director and consultant. He was superintendent of East St. Louis School District 189 in the early '70s and was mayor of East St. Louis in the late '70s.

"It was all because of my parents," he said. "They encouraged us and made us feel that there was no goal you couldn't achieve if you set your mind to it."

Mason has tried to pass on that philosophy to his three children, Terrance, 48, Bill Jr., 37, and Stacey, 19.

Bill Jr. is gradually taking over the landscaping company, which his father started in 1986 as a small grass-cutting business with two riding lawn mowers. The idea was to keep his teenage son working and off the streets.

"All my buddies were running around, and I had to cut grass," Bill Jr. said. "But I always kept money in my pocket. I worked all the time."

Bill Jr. spoke last year when District 189 named its new middle school after

his father. He called Mason his "hero" and "best friend."

"He's a great role model," Bill Jr. said. "If more kids had dads like him, I think society as a whole would be a better place. A lot of kids don't have anyone to look up to."

Mason graduated from East St. Louis Lincoln High School in 1952. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science at the all-black Tennessee State University in Nashville, working summers at the steel mill and evenings as a barber.

Mason only half-jokingly maintains his "big break" came one night at Tennessee, when a friend pounded on his dorm-room door and insisted he get out of bed and go to the president's house.

"The marching band was going to perform at halftime at a game of the Chicago Bears," Mason said. "The president wanted to go, but he needed a haircut. So I put my tools in a little bag, and I went to his house. I cut his hair, shaped his mustache and shaved him with a straight razor. And when he got up and looked in the mirror, he liked it so much, he set me up in a room with a barber chair on campus."

Mason had planned to serve two years in the military after college, but he failed his health screening because of a kidney obstruction and returned to work in his father's barbershop.

Mason got into education by accident. He gave someone a ride to the St. Clair County superintendent of schools office in Belleville and, instead of reading magazines in the waiting room, he took the test for a provisional teaching certificate.

Mason started substituting in Centreville schools and found his niche. He took more courses at McKendree College, taught fifth grade at Lucas School and later civics at Rock Junior High.

Mason earned his master's degree in educational administration at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He worked as principal at Attucks and Franklin elementary schools in East St. Louis and personnel director for District 189 before becoming superintendent at age 35.

"The district had 20,500 students when I was superintendent," he said. "It has a little over 9,000 today. It just breaks my heart."

Mason was elected East St. Louis mayor in 1975. Two of his biggest projects were overseeing construction of City Hall and working with the state to establish a permanent location for State Community College, now East St. Louis Community College Center.

Former city employee Stephanie Carpenter remembers how hard he pushed for the college to be built in downtown East St. Louis.

"It was a great move on our part, and it has served the city well," said Carpenter, 60, of Fairview Heights, who also worked for District 189 and retired as deputy superintendent in 2006.

Mason lost his re-election bid to Carl Officer and started his own

consulting firm. Eight years later and tired of traveling, he traded his business suits for blue jeans and expanded the landscaping company.

Mason and his wife, Rosalyn, live in the same East St. Louis neighborhood where he grew up. He founded the Metro-East Black Contractors' Organization in 2001 to ensure government agencies followed the law by hiring a percentage of minorities to work on projects.

The group communicates with state and local officials, sponsors training programs and protests illegal hiring practices. Its 30 members range from plumbers to carpenters, concrete finishers to truck drivers.

"Bill is constantly out there fighting," said Isaac "Ike" Austin, 75, owner of MIA Construction Co. "He tries to make sure that we get our share of the jobs whenever a contract comes into East St. Louis or District 8 (of the Illinois Department of Transportation)."

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