

Muriel Bowser, Getting Ward 4 Its Fair Share

BY TANYA SNYDER



Muriel Bowser was born to be your councilmember.

She comes from a family steeped in public service and a love of Washington, DC. Bowser's father was in the first class of ANC commissioners just as the ANCs got their start in 1976. He just finished serving his last term. Bowser grew up going to community meetings and distributing flyers in her neighborhood, North Michigan Park.

Who is Muriel Bowser?

Bowser is the youngest of five children, nine years younger than the next youngest. In her youth, she bowled, ran track, played softball and participated in

student government, often rising to leadership positions in her chosen activities. When asked if she had a rebellious streak growing up, she responds, "You clearly haven't met my mother." She describes her mother as a "tough lady" and a "great mother." Her parents still live in the house she grew up in, in Ward 5.

Bowser says she grew up thinking she lived in "the greatest neighborhood there was." As she got older, she realized other neighborhoods were getting more investment, more amenities. "So we grew up making sure that people knew how great we were and how we could get our fair share," she says. "And that's what I do now. That's exactly what my job is: to say, 'This is a great ward.' People care about where they live, they invest in their homes and their families. And we just

want to make sure that we're getting our fair share because we do our fair share."

When she goes to church, she goes to St. Anthony's in Brookland with her parents, but she doesn't make it there every Sunday. She says faith was a part of how she was brought up, and it "plays a big role in my life – not so much my political life."

Bowser isn't married, and she pours all her love into the ward she represents. She works until about 9:30 most nights, showing up at community meetings and dinner events nearly every night to stay in touch with her constituents. Even weekends are workdays for her.

In her scant free time, Bowser spends time with her family, explores new restaurants and goes for

walks. She recently started taking golf lessons on the weekends and is looking forward to an upcoming tournament at Ward 4's Rock Creek Park golf course. Accustomed to keeping up a regular fitness routine, Bowser says the worst thing about being so busy is that (other than the golf lessons) she hasn't found time to exercise. "I won't even tell you how I've expanded," says the still-slim Bowser. "But I'm going to change that. You have to be healthy in this job." She's determined to reestablish a pattern of exercise. She says she hates gyms, but she likes walking and sometimes jogs.

Though she loves the outdoors, winter is hard for Bowser. An August baby, she likes the heat. "The hotter the better!" Even autumn is a bummer, since it means the cold weather is coming.

She says she's hasn't had much time to get away since she's been on the council, but she's going on vacation over Christmas. Where? She's not telling. But she let it slip that she's got a weakness for Florida and the Caribbean.

Political Inclinations

Before running for the Ward 4 council seat, Bowser worked for Montgomery County in transportation planning and downtown revitalization. She ran for ANC commissioner in 2004, representing ANC 4B-09. She says that on the ANC she learned to work with different people's agendas and idiosyncrasies. "It is a training ground like no other," she says. "It helped me learn my community and be able to advocate for my community."

When she decided to run for the Ward 4 council seat after Adrian Fenty was elected mayor in 2006, Bowser quit her job to campaign full time. She says her parents were supportive of her decision, even offering to help her out financially since she didn't have an income during that time. She respectfully declined the money, but their support meant a lot to her. People in her neighborhood whom she'd served as ANC commissioner were also encouraging of her run for council. Fenty's endorsement of Bowser in a field of 19 candidates was a big help, and she won the special election handily.

She had known Fenty as an ANC commissioner. She says she didn't have to seek his help out a lot while she was on the ANC. "He was just always there," she says. "He supported our community like I don't think anybody else has in the past, and that made a

big difference to us." Bowser ran Fenty's campaign in Ward 4 when he ran for mayor. She was a natural choice to take his place on the council.

Bowser has sometimes been criticized for her allegiance to the mayor, with some people suggesting that she is a "rubber stamp" for Fenty's policies. The Washington Post's endorsement of her rejected this accusation, saying, "Anyone who has seen Ms. Bowser stake out a position, even when it's not popular with the crowd, would not fear for her independence."

Adam Clappitt, who ran unsuccessfully for an at-large seat on the council this year, also endorsed Bowser, calling her a selfless leader and saying that she "understands her ward and will work tirelessly to ensure that her constituents are properly represented and are receiving the best services possible from the city."

Fenty is still a big Bowser fan. He says her dedication to the people of Ward 4 is demonstrated daily in her hard work. "She listens to constituent concerns and does everything in her power to address them," he says. "The citizens of the District of Columbia as a whole are very lucky to have her on their side."

Accomplishments on the Council

On the council, Bowser has fought hard for Ward 4 constituents, and she's got the goods to show for it. Georgia Avenue is one big construction zone these days, with millions of public and private dollars funding a spate of development – the likes of which the ward hasn't seen for years.

The Riggs LaSalle ball field just opened, which in her opinion is the best in the city. It will serve the Riggs LaSalle Steelers, which has been a little league football team for 40 years. "It's projects like that which really make a big difference," she says.

Bowser is also proud of the Kennedy Street revitalization plan. She acknowledges that plans don't always show results. "The things about plans is they're plans," she says. "They're paper. They're books. They sit on the shelf."

But the Kennedy Street Clean and Safe Team, part of the plan, has become a reality, and Bowser says, "It's like you can eat off of the ground. It's so clean. It has made such a big difference."

She's done all this in an 18-month term. She's looking forward to a full, four-year term – one in which she

doesn't need to start campaigning for reelection within months of winning the last one.

What her constituents mostly contact her about, though, are quality-of-life issues: dogs that bark all night, neighbors who don't get rid of old cars, and people who park in front of their houses. They call about "trees, alleys, streets," she says. "For a long time, the city just deferred all of this maintenance. Just didn't do it. So I can't fault my residents who call me every week to say, 'When can I get my alley repaved?' Because it's never been repaved. But at the same time, I know that there's a long list to get through."

The hard part, Bowser says, is that no matter how hard you work for the ward, "there is never unanimity" about anything. "When we think we've done something really great – I mean really great – we'll have somebody say, 'Well, why didn't you do this?' and 'Well, we need that!' Sometimes even when you've made one person really happy, somebody else isn't happy at all," she says.

Forward into the Future

Bowser attended the Democratic National Convention in Denver this summer, one of her few trips away from the District since joining the council. She says she learned a lot by watching other politicians speak and studying how they get their messages across. Aside from Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, her "surprise favorite" was Dennis Kucinich, with his message of "wake up, America!" She says he wasn't trying to move people from the right to the left, but that he wanted to help people move from the bottom up.

Bowser says she identifies strongly as a Democrat. She doesn't take for granted that DC will always be a strongly Democratic city. "People move into our city every day. And they're not all Democrats," she says.

The impact of the shaky economy on DC will be a little different than in other parts of the country, Bowser says. "We've been fairly well insulated in this city," she says. "We haven't had the types of foreclosures – we don't have as much new housing as a lot of folks – and we haven't had the job loss, and we hope that holds true, because a lot of our workers are government workers."

Strong, steady leadership in uncertain times is a balancing act. "We have to make sure we're being fiscally responsible yet taking care of the core services we have to provide our residents." But,

she says, infrastructure needs to come first. "When we have to make tough decisions, we don't want it to be streets and trees and alleys because we need those. And we definitely don't want to back step on schools because we're making such incredible progress."

Where will Muriel Bowser be in 10 years? "Well, I'm going to be in DC, I'll assure you of that. I'll likely be right here in Ward 4, in the house I have



now, coming up on 10 years ... And I'm going to be in public service."

She's followed Mayor Fenty's footsteps up until now, with her door-to-door campaigning and her tireless advocacy for Ward 4 residents. Will she follow him all the way into the mayor's office?

"I think I'm going to be happy to have a four-year term!" she says. "I just love this city, and I'm happy to have an opportunity to serve."

To learn more about Muriel Bowser, visit her website, www.dccouncil.us/Bowser/index.html or call her office, 202-724-8052. ★