Mayor Albert Wheeler

This is Part Two of "Albert Wheeler Remembers," a two-part series reporting the reminiscences of Ann Arbor's 54th mayor.

In the first part, published in our August issue, we told of Mayor Wheeler's background and education, culminating in an appointment in 1932 to the U-M faculty. This second and final part covers Mr. Wheeler's growing involvements in Ann Arbor politics in the late 1940's to his experiences as mayor.

"Raising hell"—that's how the generally mild-mannered Mayor Wheeler of 1976 characterizes his activities in Ann Arbor, during his service on city council and as the city's mayor.

Wheeler, a former teacher, says he probably would agree on that point: as Ann Arbor's most persistent and often strident advocate for civil rights and minority causes, he did indeed raise hell.

Wheeler's professional and political life changed abruptly in the 1960's. Because federal equal opportunity and social programs had been established, he felt the pressure for such causes had abated. At Cardinal Deenihan's invitation, he decided to take a leave of absence from his U-M academic post in microbiology to become Director of Christian Services for the night-city Archdiocese of Detroit. Wheeler had converted to Catholicism over twenty years earlier. Professionally he changed from the role of researcher and teacher to that of administrator. He commented daily to Detroit and directed the embryonic Catho-lic programs for human rights, for political education, for problems of the aged and youth, and for health care, as well as the established social services programs.

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For Three Decades He Has Been Fighting for the Underdog

such as child care, legal services, and health care which so many of our citizens need. I made it very clear to the Democrats what the thrust of my campaign was going to be; I was going to announce my candidacy.

This is the first time Wheeler ran for office, and overall, campaigning proved to be an unpleasant experience. He was used to speaking out in public on issues. But this often vocal man found himself inhibited when it came to trying to convince people that he was not a one-issue (civil rights) candidate for mayor. As he drove through neighborhoods where he was wearing, though made him to point to appear before all the groups that invited him to speak, even when they promised few Democratic votes. His four-year absence from the city had made him a stranger to many newswomen—Independents, Democrats, and young people, so he was faced with the additional task of gaining support.

By election day, it was generally thought that Wheeler's Republican opponent, Jim Stephenson, would edge out a victory. And when most of the votes were counted, Wheel-

er himself was convinced he had lost. Stephenson was 3,000 votes ahead when all the ballots were counted. But because of the third party candidate from the Human Rights Party, Stephenson failed to get a majority of votes. Under the city's preferential voting law, this meant that the HRP's second choice vote for mayor had to be counted. Wheeler doubted he'd pick the 80% to 85% of the HRP second-choice vote he needed to win, because he had campaigned against the HRP rent-control and day-care funding Charter amendments on the grounds they were too lenient.

As it turned out, more than 90% of the HRP vote designated Wheeler for second choice, and therefore Wheeler had won by about 120 votes. The Republicans, shocked by an unexpected defeat caused by the city's controversial voting law, decided to contest the legality of the Wheeler victory by seeking to delay his certification of victory by the city and county. They also sought to have the preferential voting law declared unconstitutional. Judicial opinion ordered Wheeler's certification and has upheld the law's constitutionality (which, ironically, has since been repealed by the voters). And though Wheel-

er's campaign expenses amounted to only $10,000, the legal expenses since the election have amounted to $13,000.

Some may see Wheeler's election to the highest elected post in the city as the crowning achievement in his long public career. Being mayor may have been a mistake for him, and frustrating for him. Wearing he spends over forty hours a week on the job, in addition to his nearly full-time appointment as associate professor in the Medical School. The job of mayor has been frustrating because, as a Demo-

cratic mayor, he has never had a majority of Democrats on City Council. In 1975-76 the split was five Democrats, five Republicans, with a third party vote, since the Repub-

clican upset victory in the First Ward in April, Republicans now hold the 6-5 edge. As a result, all the major legislation and programs Wheeler has proposed have been blocked, and his closers come only from his mayoral vote, which it takes eight votes to override.

As mayor, Wheeler presides over the almost weekly, often long meetings of the council meetings. The mayor's job is "an exercise in patience," which marathon legislative meet-

ings are to Wheeler "probably the least difficult part of the job." Theoretically the mayor has some partisan advan-
lage in running the Council sessions: be together with the speakers and as a partisan role what discussion is in order. Republican Council members agree, however, that Wheeler runs the sessions in a fair manner. "I try to step bicicering. I try to allow partisan rebuttals on issues, let everybody say what they want to and get it out and over with. Sometimes I make Democratic council people angrier than Republicans because I try to do it evenhanded." The city council meetings are the single most visible and time consuming part of being mayor, leading many to believe it is the biggest part of his job. But much more time and work is actually involved. There is setting up the agenda with City Administrator Skye Murray ten days in advance. Then there's questioning city departments on issues coming up for vote, and sometimes double-checking that information from other sources. In this city this is a typically Democratic, in Wheeler's case stemming from many years outside city government, when he be-


evolved city officials "were foot-draging on activities and issues affecting blacks and low-income residents."

The Council information packet prepared for each Coun-

cil session runs from 100 to 200 pages, and just reading through it each time is a massive task. Sunday evenings before Monday Council meetings each party caucuses to discuss forthcoming decisions; that's another two to four hours.

Other mayoral duties include reading and signing con-

tracts and bond issues, representing the Washtenaw Coun-

ty area at monthly regional planning of SECOG (South-

eastern Michigan Council of Governments), researching and recommending appointments for the twenty-four regu-

lar committees and boards appointed by the mayor, and representing the city in a demanding community role.

In addition, in this presidential election year, the mayor is expected to work for and attend meetings for all federal, state and County candidates.

It all adds up to a tight schedule, with four nights a week tied up. "Other nights would be," Wheeler says, "but I just draw the line, and I try to keep Saturday free just so I can have time to sit down, relax, and be myself."

Wheeler's lifestyle of long hours, frequent meetings, and very little recreation is usually what it takes to leave a mark in politics and community service. Many people have been active on the civic scene for a long time since he began in the late 1940's. His immediate future centers around whether to run for reelection in April, and so far he's uncertain on which course to follow. He doesn't want to serve another frustrating term as minority-party mayor, so, depending on his sense of city Democratic possibilities in the next election, he may run again or may return to full-time University responsibilities and find some other area of social involvement. If Wheeler is not the mayor after April 1977, he states that "a high priority item for my future community involvement is to re captures and publicize the knowledge of who runs this City based on 25 years as a community activist, outsider and the last two years as mayor."

Despite a lifetime of accomplishment in his professional field of microbiology, in civil rights, in social justice for the Archdiocese of Detroit and the National Catholic Church, and in politics, Al Wheeler is not inclined to sit back on his laurels. In many ways, he is as disheartened as ever, but with broader concerns. Merely integrating children in school and opening up the housing market has not broken the cycle of poverty to achieve true equal opportunity, and that has been disheartening for someone who has, in his own words, "worked and raised hell" for so long to alle-

viate inequality. Tactless Al Wheeler is still plugging for social change through governmental means. He made his mind up over two decades ago when he and his wife de-

cided to settle here that he would change something. He hasn't stopped acting on that resolution yet.