

# Vel Phillips

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*Making History in*

BY CAROL COHEN



## *Milwaukee*

Educated at Howard University, where she was schooled in African American history, Vel Phillips (1924–present) has taken every opportunity during her long career in the public eye to advocate for social justice and civil rights for Milwaukee’s African Americans. “America,” she said in a 1955 speech, “is not the land of opportunity it is purported to be—not while discrimination and segregation exist, and where those belonging to the Negro race can secure only second class citizenship with definite limitations.”<sup>1</sup> Always outspoken, favoring the limelight, young Phillips had charisma and an astuteness that propelled her into a long career in civic life with a desire “to make a difference.” Her election to the Milwaukee Common Council in 1956 made history.

Vel Phillips was a star from the start of her adult life. In 1951, she graduated from law school at the University of Wisconsin–Madison as the first African American woman to complete the LL.B. degree. After graduating, she and her husband Dale, who’d completed the same program in 1950, returned to Milwaukee, where Phillips was born. The young couple settled in the heart of the city’s urban inner core on Walnut Street, both practicing law and engaging in community life.<sup>2</sup> Having had a comfortable middle-class upbringing, Phillips’s volunteer work in the impoverished sections of the inner city was sobering and motivated her to work for change.

By the time the Phillipses settled on Walnut Street, the area was overcrowded and dilapidated. As a volunteer for the League of Women Voters, Phillips “went from house to house, speaking to home owners and tenants, registered voters and newcomers. . . . She learned for the first time the full story of crowded living conditions, blight, disease and ignorance which affected much of the territory.”<sup>3</sup> Discriminatory real estate and banking practices and outright racism in the city’s white neighborhoods had long segregated Milwaukee’s African American population into an urban ghetto on the near North Side. Scholar Joe Trotter calls it a “city within a city,” an isolated but self-sustaining community.<sup>4</sup> It included a relatively prosperous black middle class and a burgeoning African American migrant population from the South, as well as a population of poor whites who could not afford to live elsewhere. Post–World War II migrants seeking jobs in Milwaukee’s booming industries contributed to a sharp rise in the city’s African American population, from 13,000 in 1945 to 21,772 in 1950. (The city counted 637,342 total residents in 1950). As newly arrived African Americans looking for housing pushed beyond the boundaries of the old inner core, white residents relocated to the city’s suburbs.<sup>5</sup>

An unsuccessful effort to win a seat on the Milwaukee School Board in 1953 did not dampen Phillips’s ambition to effect social change. An opportunity arose in 1955 after the

Phillips addressing the Milwaukee Common Council in the mid-1960s



Velvalea R. Phillips, bottom row, and classmates pictured in the UW–Madison Law School Yearbook, 1951

city reapportioned its electoral districts from 27 to 19 wards. The Phillipses found themselves residents of the newly-created Second Ward, which included the largely African American neighborhood where Vel Phillips grew up, and which now had an open seat on the city’s Common Council. Eight candidates declared their intention to run in the Second Ward; Phillips was one of two African Americans vying for the seat.

No woman or African American had ever been elected to the Common Council when Phillips announced her candidacy in October 1955.<sup>6</sup> She kept a low profile, relying on campaign workers to go door-to-door promoting voter registration and a “get out the vote” message and, almost as if incidentally, the candidacy of Vel Phillips.<sup>7</sup> She used to her advantage the fact that her first name was not necessarily recognized as belonging to a woman. Leonard Zubrensky, longtime friend and campaign assistant in that election, recalls that canvassers used different pieces of campaign literature depending on what neighborhood they visited in the racially mixed Second Ward—some with a photograph of Phillips, some without.<sup>8</sup> Savvy in her remarks to the press about this strategically vague campaign, Phillips told a reporter, “Win or lose, I wanted to bring up the low percentage of registered voters [and] to urge non-registered voters to participate in all elections.”<sup>9</sup> She knew



Velvalea Rodgers and W. Dale Phillips on their wedding day, September 12, 1948

she needed a large percentage of the African American vote to win.

Electoral redistricting had also resulted in several incumbent aldermen running against each other in newly created wards and made for intense rivalries alongside an already contentious race for the mayor’s office. That contest made national news in a *Time* magazine article titled “The Shame

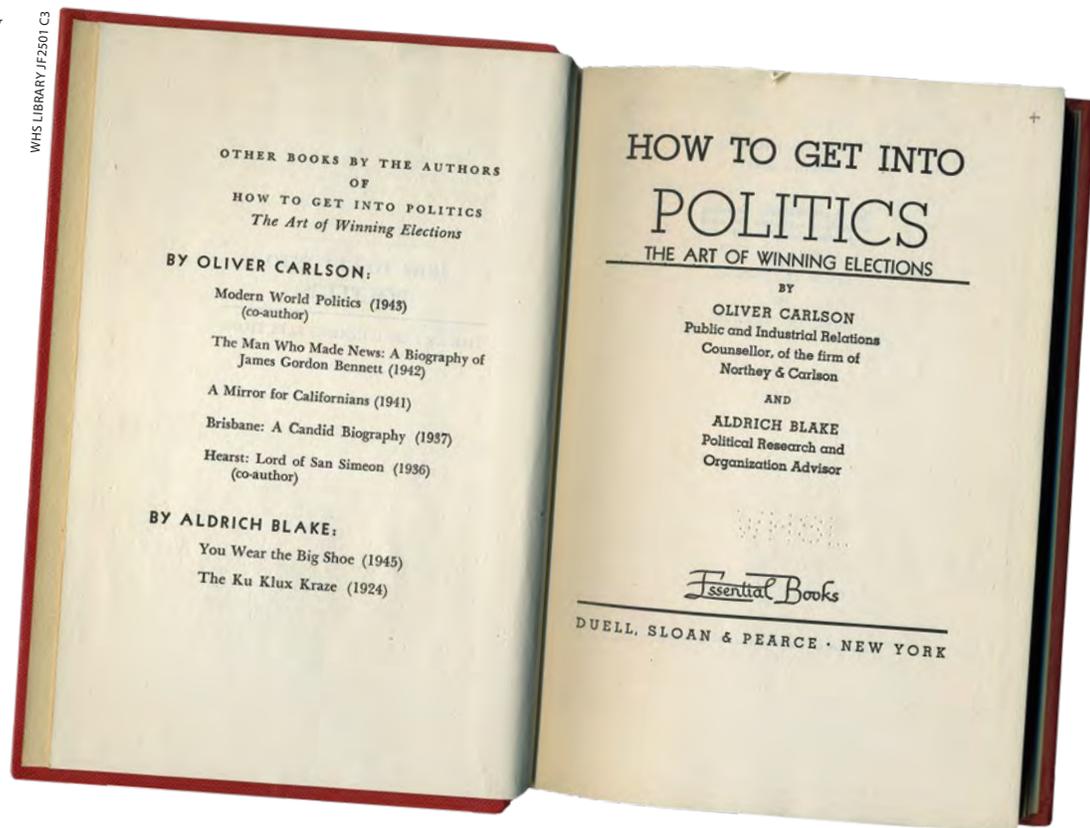
of Milwaukee,” because of ugly racial slurs used against incumbent mayor Frank Zeidler.<sup>10</sup> Zeidler was a proponent of slum clearance and public housing, ideas unpopular with many white Milwaukeeans.<sup>11</sup> One newspaper journalist proclaimed: “What is undoubtedly one of the meanest and most vicious aldermanic campaigns in Milwaukee’s history is growing meaner and more vicious every day.”<sup>12</sup> Phillips was understandably reluctant to reveal that she was an African American woman, even though she had more education than many of the white male candidates.<sup>13</sup>

With a concentrated African American population in the new Second Ward, Phillips and LeRoy Simmons, an African American, emerged winners of the primary, with Phillips topping Simmons by 93 votes.<sup>14</sup> Another African American woman in the Sixth Ward also made the primary, prompting the *Milwaukee Sentinel* to remark, “Milwaukee was assured of its first Negro alderman and might get its first woman alderman as a result of the voting.”<sup>15</sup>

After the primary, Phillips’s identity as a woman and an African American became widely known, which she believed would be a liability. The newspapers made much notice of her race and gender.<sup>16</sup> She also had to contend with a write-in candidate, Julian Nagel, a white man, who was running hard and, according to Phillips, “playing the race card.” Another write-in, Frank Kanauz, only increased the pressure. On April 1, 1956, the *Sentinel* endorsed Phillips as “the better qualified candidate,” as did the *Milwaukee Journal* on April 2.<sup>17</sup>

On April 3, Phillips, age 32, won the election, beating the write-in Julian Nagel by 357 votes. LeRoy Simmons trailed in third place.<sup>18</sup> After her election victory, the *Sentinel* queried, “When a winning candidate for alderman is a lady—is she an alderwoman?”<sup>19</sup> The tension between gender and race is a theme that runs through Vel Phillips’s narrative as she looks back on the experience of running for public office.

Wisconsin Public Television producer Robert Trondson interviewed Phillips in front of a camera six times over the course of 2013. He used those interviews to make the documentary *Vel Phillips: Dream Big Dreams*. The following narrative is taken from transcripts of several of the interviews, but mostly



A political novice in 1955, Phillips consulted books from the Milwaukee Public Library on how to run for public office.

from the one on May 1, 2013. As interviews often go, there is no simple narrative through-line in any of them. In several instances during the six interviews, Trondson re-questions Phillips on a subject she spoke about in a past interview; on other occasions, Phillips retells a story with added detail or additional context or more animated flair. This first-person narrative excerpts passages from some sixteen hours of interviews, which have been arranged chronologically to tell Phillips’s story about her historic run for city council.



### Entry into Public Life

**Vel Phillips:** It was really bad in Milwaukee. Milwaukee was considered one of the more segregated, prejudiced cities in the whole United States. That’s what really put me into the city council. I knew I had to do something. I could see how segregated we were, how much more crime we had, how much poorer people were. It just wasn’t the way it should be.

I was right away very interested in the community. I joined the League of Woman Voters; I joined the YWCA. Woman’s Court and Civic Conference was another women’s group. I didn’t know it at the time that I was going to run for anything; it was just natural for me to be involved in the community. My husband said, “Honey, I just want to be able to take care of you and the family and give you everything that you deserve.” So

# Notice of Non-Partisan Spring Election

Office of the Board of Election Commissioners, City of Milwaukee, March 26, 1956

To the Electors of the City of Milwaukee:

Notice is hereby given that a Non-Partisan Spring Election is to be held in the several wards and election precincts in the city of Milwaukee on the third day of April, 1956, at which the officers named below are to be chosen. The names of the candidates to be voted for, whose nominations have been certified in this office, are given under the title of the office.

Board of Election Commissioners, City of Milwaukee

ROBERT VOLLBRECHT,  
Chairman

(Seal) LEONARD W. GALBRECHT  
GEORGE C. SECORA

## Information to Voters

The following instructions are given for the information and guidance of voters:

A voter, upon entering the polling place and giving his name and residence, will receive a ballot from the ballot clerk which must have endorsed thereon the names or initials of both ballot clerks, and no other ballot can be used. Upon receiving his ballot, the voter must retire alone to a booth or compartment and prepare the same for voting. A ballot clerk may inform the voter as to the proper manner of marking a ballot but he must not advise or indicate in any manner whom to vote for.

At a non-partisan election the voter shall mark his ballot by making a cross or mark in the square at the right of the name of the candidate for whom he intends to vote or by inserting or writing in the name of the candidate.

The ballot should not be marked in any other manner. If the ballot be spoiled, it must be returned to the ballot clerk, who must issue another in its stead, but not more than three in all shall be issued to any one voter. Five minutes' time is allowed in booth to mark ballot. Unofficial ballots or memoranda to assist the voter in marking his ballot may be taken into the booth and

may be used to copy from. The ballot must not be shown so that any person can see how it has been marked by the voter.

After the ballot is marked it should be folded so that the inside cannot be seen, but so that the printed indorsements and signatures of the ballot clerks on the outside may be seen. Then the voter should pass out of the booth or compartment, give his voter's certificate to the inspector in charge of the ballot box, hand him his ballot to be placed in the box, and pass out of the voting place.

A voter, who declares to the presiding officer that he is unable to read, or that by reason of physical disability he is unable to mark his ballot, may have assistance of two election officers, not of the same party, in marking same, to be chosen by the voter; and if he declares that he is totally blind, or that his vision is so impaired that he cannot read the ballot, he may be assisted by any person chosen by him from among the legal voters of the county. The presiding officer may administer an oath in his discretion, as to such person's disability.

The following is a facsimile of the official ballot, except that the names of candidates are rotated in the different precincts, as provided by law.

Official Non-Partisan ELECTION BALLOT	
To vote for a person whose name is printed on the ballot, make a cross (X) in the square after his name.	
To vote for a person whose name is not printed on the ballot, write his name in the blank space under the printed names.	
<b>FOR MAYOR</b> <span style="float:right">Vote for One</span>	
MILTON J. McGUIRE	<input type="checkbox"/>
FRANK P. REIDLER	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>FOR CITY ATTORNEY</b> <span style="float:right">Vote for One</span>	
JOHN J. ELEMING	<input type="checkbox"/>
WALTER J. MATTHEWSON	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>FOR CITY COMPTROLLER</b> <span style="float:right">Vote for One</span>	
VIRGIL H. HURLESS	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>FOR CITY TREASURER</b> <span style="float:right">Vote for One</span>	
JOSEPH J. KRUEGER	<input type="checkbox"/>
JOSEPH G. KUJAWA	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>FOR ALDERMAN</b> <span style="float:right">Vote for One</span>	
FOR NAMES OF CANDIDATES IN THE DIFFERENT WARD SEE LIST OF NOMINEES	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	

List of Nominees for Alderman	
<b>1st Ward</b> FRANK LIPSKI JAMES J. MORTIER	<b>10th Ward</b> CARL H. KRUEGER GEORGE W. WHITTOV
<b>2nd Ward</b> VEL PHILLIPS LEROY J. SIMMONS	<b>11th Ward</b> VALENTINE V. KUJAWA MATHIAS P. MUELLER
<b>3rd Ward</b> ALFRED C. HASS EMIL M. MILLER	<b>12th Ward</b> MATHIAS P. SCHIMENZ ROBERT SULKOWSKI
<b>4th Ward</b> MATHEW PINTER CHARLES H. QUIRK	<b>13th Ward</b> BERNARD B. KROENKE KENNETH E. KUENN
<b>5th Ward</b> ANTHONY J. BERG IRVING G. RAHN	<b>14th Ward</b> EDWARD J. KALUPA RICHARD E. NOWAKOWSKI
<b>6th Ward</b> FRED P. MEYERS MARY ELLEN SHADD	<b>15th Ward</b> CLARENCE A. HEIDEN HARRY P. WITTE
<b>7th Ward</b> WILLIAM P. KEPPLER MARTIN E. SCHREIBER	<b>16th Ward</b> JAMES H. COLLINS WILLIAM H. LAWLER
<b>8th Ward</b> EDMUND J. CHOINSKI PETER H. HOFFMANN	<b>17th Ward</b> JOSEPH SCHMIDT ERWIN F. ZILLMAN
<b>9th Ward</b> RALPH F. KELLY FRED F. SCHALLERT	<b>18th Ward</b> RALPH J. LANDOWSKI ROBERT E. MCINTYRE
	<b>19th Ward</b> JOHN H. BUDZIEL VAL J. RESZEL

The Spring Election will be held at the regular polling place in each precinct in the City of Milwaukee, and the polls will be open from 7 o'clock a. m. until 8 o'clock p. m.

Witnessed under our hands and official seal this 26th day of March, A.D., 1956.

ROBERT VOLLBRECHT  
Chairman

(SEAL) LEONARD W. GALBRECHT  
GEORGE C. SECORA

Board of Election Commissioners of the City of Milwaukee

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Portrait of Phillips dated February 7, 1953, a month prior to the school board primary election in which she was a candidate

I was a community person and he was the one sticking with the law practice.

Every ten years, Wisconsin would be reapportioned. But it had been 30 years, three decades, and the *Journal* and the *Sentinel*—they were separate then—both were running editorials about it. I had joined the League of Women Voters and [reapportionment] was their challenge. I was supposed to go door-to-door to tell people how important it was to vote and, if they weren't registered, to tell them how to register and where to go. And that area was where I lived. That's really how I got interested in politics, with the League of Women Voters. And I went out and knocked on doors for reapportionment.<sup>20</sup>

Not many black women associated, at that time, with the League. They were kind of, how shall I say it, intellectual, snobbish, almost in a way, white people who met at their various homes. They met in Whitefish Bay and all like that. And since we lived on Walnut Street above a drugstore, I associated myself with the downtown office, which was the closest. And I was the only black in the League of Women Voters. I didn't see any other blacks. [In the black

A sample ballot published in the April 2, 1956, *Milwaukee Journal* names Phillips and her opponent LeRoy Simmons as nominees for city council in the Second Ward and another African-American woman, Mary Ellen Shadd, as a candidate in the Sixth Ward.

community] I was a Delta, which was a black sorority [Delta Sigma Theta], in the NAACP, and I was active in my church [Saint Mark African Methodist Episcopal].

I went door to door and I think that's when I really got the bug, because I lived in the ghetto. I couldn't understand the poverty. Some of the houses didn't have any [central] heat and they had a space heater in them. Then, if you went in the kitchen, they would have the oven on and the door open because that was the heat. The rest of the house would be cold. Children would be running around. I thought that was dangerous. I was struck by buildings that were rear houses [residences behind the main building on the property]. I had never seen that kind of poverty.

I'll never forget, because I guess this is still an election practice. If you were in favor of reapportionment, you voted no. If you were against reapportionment, you voted yes. I had to explain to people that you had to vote no. Then I had to explain to them why—that we didn't have representation in government and, maybe, for the first time in Milwaukee's history, blacks could have some voice and we could do things about housing. I'd explain all that to them. I knew that no black person had ever been elected.

Everyone was very sweet and very nice. They'd say things like, "I don't vote or anything like that." Because they had just moved from Alabama or Arkansas or something. I'd say, "Voting is very important." That's when I really began to understand that there were great differences in the wages. I just got taken with it. Nobody knew that I was born in Milwaukee, but in a different kind of world.<sup>21</sup> When I came in from going door-to-door, Dale would rub my feet and I would just be worn out. I just got consumed with how people lived. They were just so poor. And we were poor, but it was a different kind of poor. My husband said, "If they do reapportion, there may be a ward that has no one representing it. I think you should run." But he had always said that he would run.

After redistricting, when the city actually did have a ward that

had no representation at all, my husband didn't want to do it. He would tease me and say, "Honey, why don't you do it?" He pointed out, "You ran for school board, you almost won."<sup>22</sup> He was trying to get out of running himself, because he had promised. I said, "You promised me you would run." Since I had taken his name when we married, I thought, "This is the way that we'll get to be known as lawyers." He didn't say no because he would never just say no. He would say, "Well, let's talk about it; let's sleep on it," the more I pressed him on it. He finally told me, "Honey, this is just not my thing." He finally said, "Why don't you do it? You have the same qualifications as I do." Then when I really had to think about it, after Dale

Wednesday, April 4, 1956 \*\*\*

# 15 Incumbent Aldermen Win; Three Supervisors Defeated

## County Board to Have Nine New Members

Zuerner, Strehlow and Larsen Are Beaten by Mertz, Lippert and Biemann

By AVERY WITTENBERGER  
Of The Journal Staff  
Pictures on page 15, part 1  
Three county supervisors were defeated Tuesday.

They are William L. Zuerner, George O. Strehlow and Marty Larsen.

The county board, enlarged to 24 members by redistricting, will have nine new faces when it is organized later this month. Fifteen of the 20 incumbents will return.

Zuerner was beaten by Assemblyman Edward F. Mertz in the 8th district. Strehlow lost to Assemblyman James G. Lippert in the 7th. Larsen was defeated by Supervisor John R. Biemann in the 13th, the only contest in which redistricting pitted incumbents against each other.

Other newcomers to the board include Earl F. Keegan, Jr., in the 8th district; Edward W. Lane in the 9th; William R. Moser in the 10th; Patrick H. Fast, now a Milwaukee alderman, in the 18th; Rudolph P. Pohl in the 20th; John P. Murphy in the 21st, and Robert Schmidt in the 23rd.

The unofficial returns were:

1st District	
Edward F. Mertz	7,200
William L. Zuerner (inc.)	5,188
2nd District	
Walter F. Hintz (inc.)	3,317
James W. King	1,835
3rd District	
Frank G. Gregory (inc.)	5,535
Clinton A. Boone, Jr.	2,909
4th District	
William F. O'Donnell (inc.)	5,174
(Unopposed)	
5th District	
Lawrence J. Timmerman (inc.)	7,147
Mark W. Ryan	4,401
6th District	
George J. Hermann (inc.)	3,318
Isaac N. Coggis	3,215
7th District	
James G. Lippert	4,890
George O. Strehlow (inc.)	4,334

Vel Phillips, new alderman

## 'Councilman' Phillips Now 'Twice Blessed'

By ELLEN GIBSON  
Of The Journal Staff

"There were so many good people in my corner, really, I felt I couldn't miss."

That was the way Vel Phillips, 32, the first woman and the first Negro elected to Milwaukee's common council, accepted the news of her narrow victory Tuesday in a four-cornered race in the 2nd ward.

Happy but weary Wednesday, she vowed to make being an alderman her full-time responsibility with a goal of 100% attendance.

"There was a real challenge in running," Mrs. Phillips said, thoughtfully, "since there had never been a woman on the

band and I learned just recently that we are going to be twice blessed."

The Phillips' baby, their first, is due in August. They had given up hope of a family after three times receiving medical advice that none was possible. The news took both Vel and Dale by surprise when they learned it, belatedly, after Vel emerged from the primary the leading candidate.

Benny Eilivens' Scene

She is confident that parenthood won't make her shirk her city hall duties.

"I actually think parents are better parents when both are an active part of their community," she said.

## New Members in the Council to Total Four

Negro Woman Victor; Schreiber Mentioned as in Lead for Choice for Presidency

By MERIBICK S. WING  
Of The Journal Staff

Milwaukee voters re-elected incumbent aldermen Tuesday when they chose the city's 19 member common council.

There will be only four new members in the new council which takes office Apr. 17, a two of them are former aldermen.

Four incumbents also were defeated. In each case, they were matched against another incumbent as a result of the 11 legislative redistricting which reduced the number of city wards from 28 to 19.

Ald. Martin E. Schreiber loomed Wednesday as the leading candidate for president of the common council to succeed A. Milton J. McGuire, who vacated his council post to run unopposed for mayor.

Wins by 1,800 Votes

Schreiber scored a solid victory over Ald. William P. Keppeler in the 7th ward, winning by more than 1,800 votes. A council member since 1944, Schreiber was deemed to be the choice of organized labor for the council presidency.

Schreiber was backed by the Labor's Political League for reelection. Twelve other of the winning aldermanic candidates had labor support. The council elects its own presiding officer.

Other presidential possibilities appeared to be Aldermen James J. Mortier, Alfred C. Hass, Martin Schmeizer, Bernard Kroenke and John H. Budzian. All but Budzian had labor's endorsement. Schreiber seemed to have the edge, however.

The new council will have first woman and first Negro member in Mrs. Vel Phillips, 32, old attorney who was elected in the 2nd ward.

Has 356 Vote Margin

According to unofficial returns, Mrs. Phillips had a vote margin over Julian A. Giel, who was a write-in candidate.

Mrs. Phillips, a Democrat, Le Roy J. Simmons, a former assemblyman, were nominated at the March primary. Nagel, v

Phillips's election to city council appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*, April 4, 1956.



Phillips, pictured at the far left, with her colleagues in the Common Council chambers, 1956

said he didn't want to run, I said, "I don't know if there will be any women on the council." He said, "Well, so what. That wouldn't bar you from doing it." And he kept saying, "Well, you do it." I'd say, "Let's sleep on it."

Doyle Getter, who worked for the *Journal*, we got to know each other. He was just such a wonderful friend. I called him and said, "Doyle, how many women have been on the council?" He said, "I don't know. Why do you ask?" I said, "Because Dale is backing out. He doesn't want to run." He said, "Oh, you're thinking about running?" I said, "Well,

Dale doesn't want to. He's backing out." He said, "Oh, Vel, I wouldn't do it. It's a lot of men; they smoke and drink. I don't think you'd like it. You just wouldn't fit in smoke-filled rooms. You're just too dainty." I said, "Well, I don't have to drink to be a good city council person." He said all kinds of things that were superficial and not a good reason. I said, "I could maybe do something about housing and make some difference." "Well, it'll get done without you doing it," he said. The more he talked it down, the more interested I got in it.

I remembered my mother had campaigned for James Dorsey, a lawyer I admired very much. He didn't win.<sup>23</sup> That was when I was young. I left and went to college and I didn't realize that no black—at that time they said Negro—had ever been elected to city council. It made me think that this would be nice to do because my mother had campaigned for James Dorsey. She was excited. But she didn't have any concept; I don't think she really understood. "Oh, you'll win because you're old Milwaukee. You've got a good background. Your father was from a good family and you had good training." I said, "Mom, the people that I'll be asking to vote for me, they aren't old Milwaukee. They just got here from Arkansas and this and that." "Well, you're from a good family," she said. She had no concept that that had nothing to do with it. That it didn't mean to me what it meant to my mother. I thought that

## The Vel Phillips Papers

In 2014, the Wisconsin Historical Society was pleased to acquire the papers of Vel Phillips, which document her life and career as civil rights crusader, alderman, lawyer, judge, and Secretary of State. The collection will be available to the public in early 2016. The Vel Phillips papers are being prepared with the generous assistance of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, and through the endowment provided by retired UW history professors Allan and Margaret Beattie Bogue.

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**The Milwaukee Common Council, 1956-1960**

Left to right Standing: Aldermen Kelly (9th Ward), Kujawa (11), Landowski (18), Whittow (10), Kroenke (13), Quirk (4), Meyers (6), Mortier (1), Budzien (19), Schimenz (12), Schreiber (7), and Heiden (15). Seated: Aldermen Schmit (20), Collins (16), Hass (3), Schmidt (17), Phillips (2), Rahn (5), Hoffmann (8), and Nowakowski (14).

Phillips and her newly elected fellow aldermen, 1956

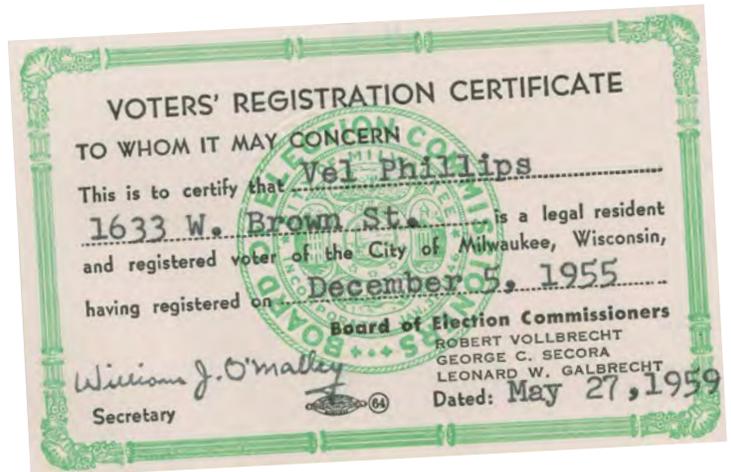
I could do something with housing because of the way people lived. I thought it was just unfair. That's how I first really got interested in housing. I was so really stunned by the conditions that I just became consumed with it. I decided to try for it.

I went to the library and got a book on how to run for a local office to find out just what you do. I knew a little because of the work I'd done for the League of Women Voters. This book told what the city council did and how important it was. It was interesting and gave me all kinds of hints. The main thing I learned, this is important, is that you can have a fundraiser, but you should always be willing to spend some of your own money.

Now, we didn't have any money. I told Dale, "This book on campaigning says that you should have some of your own money and we don't have any." He had gone to savings and loan school and had started working in banking. That was his first real, permanent job.<sup>24</sup> That's when he said, "We've got the mink coat fund." I was so surprised. "You really started a mink coat fund? You really did?" I think about it now and laugh. He never told me he had started what he called the mink coat fund. I said, "How much is in it?" "Over \$3,000 dollars."

I couldn't believe it. Now, \$3,600 dollars in 1955 was more than it would be today. He said, "You could use that." I said, "Oh, I don't know." I was thinking about this mink coat. He said, "Let's sleep on it." So the next morning, I said to him, "Did you sleep on it?" He said, "Yes." I said, "I slept on it, too." He said to me, "What did you decide?" "I decided I wanted to use it." He said, "Well, I slept on it and I've decided that we shouldn't use it." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because you want a mink coat and I want you to have a mink coat." I thought, I can always get a mink coat. This is far more important than a mink coat. It just didn't compare. I said, "Honey, I want to use it. We can get a mink coat anytime." We used it all.

WHIS PAPERS



Phillips's voter registration card. She worked on voter registration as a volunteer for the League of Women Voters in the early 1950s.

### The March 6, 1956, Primary Election

I was in an area that was maybe 60% black and 40% white. Of the 60% that were black, maybe 20% were registered voters. [Of] the 40% that were white, maybe 30% of them were registered voters. I thought that if I got enough people registered, then I could maybe make the primary. Because there were so many blacks in the area, I thought I could get them registered to vote and have a chance.

Then I got afraid. I'd learned from Doyle Getter that no woman had ever even survived a primary. I decided not to go door-to-door, but people did go door-to-door for me. Many Caucasians. I had a lot of white friends because I'd joined these groups because I was interested in government and housing and all these things. They were willing to come in and help. I had people that didn't live in the area, but were my friends,

COURTESY OF THE PHILLIPS FAMILY



Phillips with her firstborn son, Dale, pictured at the end of 1956 or the beginning of 1957

WHI IMAGE ID 120193



A campaign sticker for one of Phillips's later city council terms, undated

campaign for me. No one knew that I was . . . I don't think they ever said I was a woman, but they didn't hide that. I was more worried, actually, about being a woman than about being African American. After I was outed, after the primary election, then I really could go door-to-door. I didn't do it when no one knew I was black and no one knew I was a woman.

I was so upset when [all the candidates] went to pick out what place we'd be on the ballot. There were eight people running. We did it by putting our names in a hat and you would just pick a number. I was the eighth and I came home and was almost in tears. I was the last name on the ballot. I said to my husband, "It was terrible. There were eight of us and we had to pick a number. I picked number eight." He said, "Oh, no. If we can't be first, last can be good." He put it everywhere: "The last name on your ballot." My husband thought of that. "We'll just keep telling everyone. Remember, it's the last name on the ballot." He was sharp. He said, "Oh, honey, if you can't be first, then be last. We'll take advantage of it." [We] had these little 3 x 5 cards—red, white, and blue. On the one side, it just said "Vel Phillips, Attorney, Alderman Second Ward, City Council." Then on the other side, it had all my credentials: law school, member of League of Women Voters, and all like that.

Julian Nagel was one of the primary people. I knew he would be the one to beat. LeRoy Simmons and myself were the only blacks. LeRoy Simmons and I, we made the primary. I will never forget the *Journal* said, "For the first time in Milwaukee's history, in its 110 years, there will be a Negro on the city council, because the only two candidates

that made the primary were both Negroes. LeRoy Simmons and Vel Phillips. Even more historic, there may be a woman because one of the two candidates is a woman. And that's never happened before."<sup>25</sup> It was like I was "out." I made the primary because they didn't know I was a woman or black, really. They made such a big thing over being the first woman and the first black.<sup>26</sup> The papers made a big thing of it, on television and everything. I wasn't really with it in terms of that. I didn't really feel the impact at the time. I just thought, "Well, I was lucky." I guess that was good. I didn't really realize that this was a historic thing.

Now that it was out, I could go door-to-door, but I didn't, because I'd just found out I was pregnant. The primary was in March, the final was in April and I didn't know until after the primary that I was pregnant. As soon as I found out that I was pregnant . . . it would have been different if I had just gotten pregnant. But to find out in [March]. I was about four or five months pregnant because Dale was born in July. But I didn't show that much. I never weighed much. Right away, I started wearing [clothes] to hide it because I thought everyone could tell I was pregnant. You know, the artists kind of coats? I bought some of those so that nobody would know. I remember those days and remember how scared I was when I found out. I was so thrilled I was pregnant, but I was afraid that it would cost me the election.<sup>27</sup>

LeRoy Simmons knew my mother. He had been in the Assembly; he was the first black ever in Wisconsin.<sup>28</sup> He called my mother and said, "Is Vel running?" He asked her if she would try to get me to drop out because I hadn't been in the state Assembly [like he had]. My mother said, "Oh, I could try to talk her out of it but she'd . . ." He said, "You know she's a woman. Well, tell her she's not going to win." He threatened, he said, "Anyway, her name is Velvlea. She's going by Vel, and I'm going to challenge that." He was going to bring a lawsuit because I had my name on the ballot as Vel Phillips. He never did, but I told my husband. My husband said, "We'll change it." You know, my birth certificate said Velvlea. I was a little worried about that. I didn't even think about that [being an issue]. That's when my husband went down and had my name changed.<sup>29</sup> And we never told my mother. She would have died. I just thought that Velvlea was a long name, just long. And people knew me as Vel. I just stuck with Vel. I thought Vel was short and it was easy.

### The April 3, 1956, Election

Julian Nagel missed the primary by just a very few votes. He then became a candidate as a write-in. He was spending money and out there campaigning as a write-in, really strong. I said to my husband, "Julian Nagel is everywhere I go, I see yard signs. He's playing up the race card." My husband said, "Oh, you don't have to worry anything about a write-in. They don't count. They try, but they don't get in." That kind of

**Dream Big Dreams**

In 2015, Wisconsin Public Television launched the documentary and statewide community engagement project, *Vel Phillips: Dream Big Dreams*, to celebrate the accomplishments of civil rights leader Vel Phillips.

The film has become one of WPT's most-watched shows of the season and the project has sparked conversations across Wisconsin about equity and civil rights in the twenty-first century. In January, 550 community leaders, including Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and US Rep. Gwen Moore, gathered at the Milwaukee Art Museum to celebrate Vel Phillips's legacy. WPT has organized community events and delivered community engagement kits to organizations throughout the state to spur further conversations on equity. Additional outreach efforts will include the release of a K-12 curriculum guide for teachers.

Visit [wpt.org/velphillips](http://wpt.org/velphillips) where you can watch the documentary, *Vel Phillips: Dream Big Dreams* and download a free discussion guide.

settled me down a little bit. I figured out that I had to get a lot of white votes to win.

Now it was the day of the final. I said to my husband, "You know, honey, after the primary when people knew that I was a woman and black, I felt more free." They knew I was pregnant, but I felt more free to do things. I said, "The one thing I have not done is take people to the polls on election day." He said, "Well, why don't we do it." Right across the street



Alderman Phillips and two unidentified men at work on city business, undated

from where we lived was a very nice house. We started right there. We knocked on the door. I said, “My husband and I are here to take you to the polls.” The woman said, “I’m sorry. I always vote with my husband, and he’s not here.” I understood that because my husband and I would always vote together. She said, “Well, I’ve got to wait for him.” And just then, her husband comes in. I said, “Oh, here he is. Let us take you.” We waited a few minutes and they got in the car. I had these little red, white, and blue cards that had on one side my credentials and on the other side, I had no picture because that was a no-no. She had one in her hand.

I sat in the passenger’s seat and my husband was driving. We were telling them about Frank Zeidler and all that. We had told our campaign people to talk about Frank Zeidler, who was [running for] his fourth term and was really recognized across the United States as a fine socialist, but don’t say anything about Vel Phillips until you’re almost there. Then say, “Well, Vel Phillips is running. She’s a lawyer.” So I said,

“Now, when you get to the alderman [choices], I would think...” She didn’t let me finish. She said, “Oh, we know who to vote for for alderman. We are very convinced who we’re voting for alderman.” The woman said, “We’re voting for Vel Phillips.” The man said, “Yes, we think he’s very qualified. He’s a lawyer and this and that.” I had just turned around when the woman said they were voting for Vel Phillips; I turned around to say thank you. But I didn’t get a chance to say it, because the man popped up and said, “We think he’s a very good candidate.” And my husband said, “Oh, good. We think he’s great. You’re voting for the right person.” He never skipped a beat. So when it turned out that I won, the woman across the street called me on the phone and said, “Why didn’t you tell us that you were Vel?” I said, “Are you kidding? Your husband thought I was a man.” “I did, too!”

Julian Nagel really pulled the race card and for him to come closer to me than the person on the ballot by several hundred votes tells you how strongly racist Milwaukee was, how hard it was. It was really hard to be both the first woman, the first black, and to come out pregnant. It was really pretty hard. LeRoy [Simmons] didn’t get as many votes as Julian Nagel got. And that was scary, as he was a write-in, but he was white and he was a male. I think it would have been easier for me if I had been either a black man or a white woman. Then I would only have been the first African American, because the rest of them are all men. Or [being] a white woman would have been easier, because even though she was a woman, she was at least white and they were all Caucasian. But to have a double whammy, sort of, made it harder for me.

[Nagel] threatened to have a recount, because I didn’t win by a huge margin, but I won solidly. I thought, “Oh my goodness. He’s going to have a recount.” At that time, if you wanted a recount you had to pay for it. If he had gotten a recount, I may have lost, I don’t know. But then he didn’t have it. I was very quiet in my first term because I didn’t win by a lot.

When I won, a reporter talked to me. She said, “How does it feel to be the first woman on the city council?” I said, “Being on the council is a wonderful thing, but I have something more important and more meaningful for me.” She said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Because I’m with child. They won’t get just a woman, they’ll get a woman and a half.”

There were times when it was hard. Shirley Chisholm, who ran for president<sup>30</sup>, we got to know each other because both of us had said [the same thing] in some interviews when people would say, “What’s hardest? Being the first woman or the first black?” She had been criticized because she gave the same answer I gave. I said, “When I really think about it,



Vel Phillips, 2013

very often there are times when they do forget that I'm a black person, but they never forget that I'm a woman."

They didn't expect a woman to be a city father, you know, a city mother-to-be.



### Afterword

After her history-making election, Phillips fought to win landmark open housing legislation removing barriers for African Americans to rent and buy homes outside the city's urban center. She served nearly four terms on the Milwaukee Common Council and continued on in public office. Phillips's public service includes other trailblazing "firsts": she was the first African American in the country elected to the National Democratic Committee (1958), the first African American in the state to become a judge (1971), and the first African American and first woman elected to state office as Secretary of State (1978). Phillips has garnered numerous awards and accolades for some sixty years of community activism that continues today. Her statement, which she has often repeated, that it was harder for her in public life to be a woman than an African American, has always drawn criticism among African Americans and her steadfast commitment to civil rights and social change has often sparked controversy. Yet her place in history is anchored in her courageous run for city council that opened Milwaukee politics to women and African Americans and put Milwaukee on the national Civil Rights Movement map. ❧

### Notes

1. "Elm Grove Women's Club," *Waukesha Daily Freeman*, February 15, 1955.
2. In addition to her employment at the YWCA as a field worker, Phillips served on the radio committee of the League of Women Voters and had a Sunday morning radio program; took part in the human relations committee of the YWCA; was a board member of the Women's Court and Civic Conference; participated in the Women's Committee of the Milwaukee Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the Pan Hellenic Council. She was a local board member and state secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and active in the Democratic Party. See Rosa

- Tusa, "City's First Woman Alderman," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 4, 1956 and Ellen Gibson, "Councilman' Phillips Now 'Twice Blessed,'" *Milwaukee Journal*, April 11, 1956.
3. "Mother, Lawyer, Politician," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 9, 1958.
4. Joe William Trotter Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making in an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–1945*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 81.
5. John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999), 358–365.
6. "Negro Woman Enters Race," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 3, 1955.
7. "'Councilman' Phillips Now 'Twice Blessed.'"
8. Leonard and Ruth Zubrensky, interview by Robert Trondson, August 9, 2013, Wisconsin Public Television.
9. "City's First Woman Alderman."
10. "The Shame of Milwaukee," *Time* 67, no. 14 (April 2, 1956): 25. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed July 28, 2015).
11. Gurda, 363.
12. Trueman Farris, "City Campaign for Alderman Grows Meaner," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 24, 1956.
13. See "Biographies of Candidates for City, County Offices," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 1, 1956.
14. Merrick Wing, "Four Incumbents Lose," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 7, 1956.
15. "Alderman Voting Brews Hot Races," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 8, 1956.
16. "Four Alderman Out in Primary," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 7, 1956; "Four Incumbents Lose"; "Alderman Voting Brews Hot Races."
17. "As We See It," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 1, 1956; "Milwaukee: Tomorrow's the Day You Decide the Future of Your City," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 2, 1956.
18. "Fifteen Aldermen Win at Polls," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 4, 1956.
19. "City's First Woman Alderman."
20. "Civic-Minded Lawyer Talked into Running for Top City Post," *Jet*, May 17, 1956; "Mother, Lawyer, Politician."
21. For a description of Phillips's Walnut St., see Felicia Thomas-Lynn, "Walnut Street: A Glory Bygone," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 8, 1998 and Paul H. Geenen, *Images of America: Milwaukee's Bronzeville, 1900-1950* (Arcadia Publishing, 2006).
22. Here Phillips's memory is inaccurate. She ran for a seat on the Milwaukee School Board in the March 1953 primary election as one of eight candidates vying for a four-year term. She came in sixth and thus did not advance to the April election. See "School Board Slates Picked," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 11, 1953.
23. Esteemed and influential in the African American community at the time, attorney James Dorsey ran unsuccessfully for city council in 1936, 1940, and 1944. See Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 210.
24. Phillips is referring to Columbia Building and Loan Association, a black-owned bank founded by Wilbur and Ardie Halyard in 1924 that served the African American community.
25. Phillips is paraphrasing a front page *Milwaukee Journal* article, "Four Incumbents Lose" from March 7, 1956.
26. Phillips does not recall that there was a second African American woman, Mary Ellen Shadd, who ran for city council in the Sixth Ward and who also survived the primary election only to lose in the final.
27. The *Milwaukee Journal* reports that close to the election, "she made public appearances" and gave speeches. See "'Councilman' Phillips Now 'Twice Blessed.'"
28. LeRoy Simmons was the first African American who identified as black to serve in the Wisconsin Assembly (1944–1953) and was defeated in two previous primary elections for the Milwaukee Common Council from the Sixth Ward. See "Biographies of Candidates for City, County Offices."
29. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* and the *Milwaukee Journal* report that Phillips had her name changed "years" before the 1956 race. See "City's First Woman Alderman" and "'Councilman' Phillips Now 'Twice Blessed.'"
30. Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman elected to the House of Representatives in 1968. In 1972 she made a bid for the US presidency.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Carol Cohen** holds a PhD in theater and drama from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She has been both a theater director and a teacher of drama, as well as a college administrator. More recently, she served as grants manager for Wisconsin Public Television, where she raised funds for the making of the documentary *Vel*

*Phillips: Dream Big Dreams* and its educational outreach component. She thanks Wisconsin Public Television and producer Robert Trondson for generous access to the video and transcribed interviews of Vel Phillips.