

Joanne Collins Remains Active, Devotes Time to Family, Community



STORY TELLING HOUR—
Joanne Collins, right, captures the attention of granddaughter Courtney Guy, second from right, and from left: Senea James III, Victoria James and Aurielle James.

By Stephanie Hall
Staff Writer

Many Kansas Citians know Joanne M. Collins as a long-time city councilwoman who served the community at that post for 17 years. While she has completed her tenure with the City Council, she is still an active member of the community and a dedicated wife, mother, and grandmother.

Collins and her husband of 29 years, Robert L. Collins, have two children and two grandchildren. Collins makes sure she has time to spend with her family, especially her grandchildren.

Collins said, "I make sure I have no meetings scheduled for Wednesday or Thursday afternoons because I've started a storytelling hour for my granddaughter and the other children who live on the block."

Collins has participated in storytelling programs with the Plaza and Bluford libraries.

"When I read to children I tell an 'at-large,' or animal story and a black story. It's important that children learn to read and feel good about it. A child has access to a larger world through books. They can read about success stories and look at themselves differently," said Collins.

While Collins' family life has always been important, civic and political activities have taken up much of her time. She has been an active participant in city government for three decades. In 1973, then-Mayor Charles Wheeler appointed

Collins to fill a City Council seat left vacant after the resignation of Richard Tolbert. She was the first black ever to serve on Kansas City's Council.

"I've been involved with the council management form of government for 28 years. I wanted to get more average citizens and neighborhoods involved with City Hall. I wanted to give them access to the departments and programs which were available to help them," said Collins.

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Joanne M. Collins

Collins' tenure with the City Council was an active one. For the last ten years, until April of this year, she served as chair of the Kansas City Council Youth Development Committee which evaluates over 25 local youth services. She served as vice-chair of the Council's finance committee for eight years where she worked at reviewing the city's budget.

"We also tried, with city and private dollars, to bring money to Kansas City. The Midwest has always had a hard time receiving federal funds and we're always in competition with St. Louis so a lot of my time was spent lobbying for federal dollars."

Collins' activities have not been limited to the Kansas City area. She represented the city by appointment or election on national issues, preparing a report on the quality of life for women, which was presented at the National Association of Municipal Women. She also worked at preparing reports on women's issues during the '84 and '88 presidential elections.

Asked what was her greatest disappointment while on the City Council, she said there were few.

"I was upset when we couldn't find a site for a landfill and we didn't pass a recycling bill. But usually I don't get disappointed or give up when something doesn't go the way I'd like it to. I just try to find another way to do it," said Collins.

When asked what she misses most about her past years on the City Council, Collins replied, "The 7:30 a.m. breakfast

meetings. Even though major decisions were made at those meetings, I'm a night person and would much rather take care of things later in the day. I take time to look over agendas and do my pre-thinking at night. I'm used to having three to four meetings after 7:00 p.m."

Aside from her duties with the City Council, Collins has worked part-time at United Missouri Bank for 8 1/2 years. She is a self-proclaimed "professional volunteer," serving on 19 boards and 40 organizations, including the Niles Home, Red Cross, and Black Adoption Agencies. She works with the Area Economic Development Corporation in an effort to get businesses to relocate in the Kansas City area. She is also an active member of her church, St. Paul AME Zion.

Collins' work with youth services is extensive. She is the chair of the Community Action Committee which works with the homeless and youth at risk. She believes the biggest problem facing black youth is their lack of self-esteem and respect for adults. While she does admit that this has resulted in gangs and drug use among young blacks, she does not think a curfew is necessary.

"You can't depend on the police to make the problem go away. The community should offer other alternatives. I'm really disappointed that black leaders and ministers aren't doing a better job when they have church members and the skills to help," said Collins.

Collins is involved with the Midwest Christian Counseling Center which provides training programs for black ministers to

learn how to counsel youth drug abusers. But, Collins says many ministers have resisted the training, fearing that it would "diminish their relationship with young people."

Collins is also concerned with the prevalence of graffiti on city homes and buildings.

"The gangs responsible for the graffiti should be held accountable and made to clean it up," said Collins.

She encourages homeowners, businesses and churches to plant shrubbery around areas that have previously been defaced to prevent future acts of vandalism.

"Our citizens need to use their eyes and report problems when they see them instead of complaining about how many seconds late the police are," said Collins.

As the Council's first black female member, Collins had some views on the city's first black mayor, the Reverend Emanuel Cleaver.

"He's been in office too short of a time to make any definite conclusions on how he's doing and it takes time for the Council to get a feel for him. I think he has good, broad-based support and if he runs the city like he ran his campaign, he will do a great job," said Collins.

Collins' political career with the City Council is over since Councilmembers are now limited to serving two terms. However, her political presence will still be felt throughout the city for years to come.

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