

## **Vernon Malone – Brief Biography**

*By Dr. Barry Malone, Vernon Malone's son*

Vernon Malone lived and worked his entire life in Raleigh and its surrounding communities. For close to four decades he held an elective office. A black man who came of age during the era of segregation, he developed a firm belief that every child, regardless of race, could reach their full potential if given a solid education. Born to John and Nonnie Malone on December 20, 1931, Vernon Malone was reared on a small farm in the St. Matthew's Township just a few miles outside of Raleigh. As the youngest of eight children, he learned early the value of a supportive family and hard work. Shortly after graduating from DuBois High School in Wake Forest, Vernon was drafted into the Army where he received an honorable discharge. Initially he expressed interest in pursuing a career in law enforcement; however, a seemingly innocuous conversation with his mother set the course for his future. Nonnie Malone suggested that Vernon take advantage of the G.I. Bill's provision to cover the cost of college tuition. Four years later Vernon Malone graduated from Shaw University.

Malone's public career began with his selection to the Raleigh Parks and Recreational Advisory Committee in 1968. In the ensuing years he was also appointed to the Raleigh Community Relations Commission and an advisory committee to the mayor. After Elizabeth Cofield left the school board to become a Wake County Commissioner, the city council appointed Malone to complete her unexpired term on the school board. Shortly thereafter he was elected in his own right. His most important contribution to the city was guiding the merger and desegregation of the Raleigh and Wake County public schools.

Throughout the sixties and seventies whites migrated out of the city and into the growing suburbs around Raleigh. This resulted in an increasingly polarized dual school system, with a largely black urban school population and a growing white suburban school populace. Though the local community was largely opposed to merger, the respective school boards realized that merging the two school systems was necessary to achieve racial and economic balance in the close to eighty schools throughout the city and county. Many blacks and whites feared the effect a merged school system would mean for education and the community at large. It was clear that a merger would inevitably lead to racial integration on an unprecedented scale in the schools. Whites in rural and suburban areas feared that either their schools' culture might change or that their children might be forced to attend historically black schools in the city. Blacks fretted about losing their school traditions and the vocal opposition they heard from whites throughout the community. Additionally, the business community grew alarmed at the prospect of white flight from the city and what it meant for the long term economic health of Raleigh.

It was into this milieu that Vernon Malone was selected as Vice-Chairman of the Interim Board of Education which developed the plans to merge the two systems. When the board officially became the Wake County Board of Education, Vernon Malone was elected as its inaugural chairman in 1976. As the chairman, it was his responsibility to bridge the gap that existed between the divided constituencies. In a time period when being a fire-brand would have been easy fodder for the cameras and the newspaper, Malone chose instead to reach out to all parts of the community. He worked to make sure that two goals were always aligned. First, it was the responsibility of the board to ensure that the black children in his district received a quality education. Second, that the merger of the two school systems bring blacks and whites in the community together and not serve as wedge to drive them further apart.

The first year the school board focused primarily on school assignment because the driving force behind the merger was integration. Under Malone's leadership, along with school superintendent John Murphy, the board sketched out a plan for integration that included busing students. This was a huge challenge because few on either side liked the prospect of busing their children across town to another school. Vernon Malone and John Murphy worked tirelessly to promote the benefits of the merger and help allay some of the lingering resentment. Together and separately they attended church services, civic meetings, and spoke before school groups. To help garner support for the plan Malone welcomed Murphy professionally and personally into Raleigh. For example, to introduce Murphy to the black community, Malone hosted an open house in his residence. They even made it a point to have their children play together. The objective was to set a tone for dealing with integration as well as show the county that the two men responsible for guiding this merger were not just professional colleagues, but also friends.

Four years after the merger, the Wake County Public School System deemed the union effective. In a report they stated the following:

*[A]n acceptable desegregation plan has been implemented without major social or political confrontations or upheavals; and the stability of the social structure undergirding Raleigh and Wake County has been reinforced by ending a principal impetus for [w]hites to leave the City. Thus, the merger can be termed, after four years, as successful.*

Malone's leadership set the climate that allowed for the merger and integration of the schools in Raleigh to proceed without the incidents of resistance and violence that marred efforts in other urban areas.

Malone's dedication to Raleigh's citizens continued after leaving the school board. As chairman of the Wake County Board of Commissioners and state senator he actively supported Meals on Wheels and the Interfaith Food Shuttle. When the two organizations jointly built an operating facility they paid tribute to his unflagging support by naming the building after him. He was always proud to advocate on their behalf because the organizations reflected his belief that every person was entitled to a decent standard of living, including a hot nutritious meal. In addition to being a tireless advocate for children and schools, he also promoted extending library services to underserved neighborhoods throughout Raleigh.

Malone also understood how important it was for the city of Raleigh to have a sound and progressive economic base. He was on the Wake County Board of County Commissioners when discussions began regarding the design and construction of a new facility to house North Carolina State University basketball. At a time when there was significant opposition to building the facility, Malone fought for the construction of an even larger facility to house not only NCSU basketball, but also a National Hockey League team. Malone's foresight and efforts helped lead to the construction of the RBC Center in western Raleigh and the relocation of the NHL's Hartford Whalers to Raleigh. The community's support of the newly christened Carolina Hurricanes was a shock to the hockey world, and the RBC Center earned the reputation as the loudest arena in the NHL. The Carolina Hurricanes went on to win the Stanley Cup in 2006 and the NHL All Star Game was held in Raleigh in 2011. Moreover, he worked to bring one of the premier college basketball conference tournaments to the arena. For several years the RBC hosted the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association's annual tournament permitting the city to showcase itself as an up and coming player in the world of sports and conventions. These events are great examples of the

benefits the RBC Center has had on Raleigh's economy and entertainment opportunities since it opened in October 1999.

Malone's sacrifice and dedication to the city rightfully places him in the pantheon with some of Raleigh's most notable leaders. For close to four decades Vernon Malone served his community as a school board member, county commissioner, and state senator.