

CAMBRIDGE – Sept. 25, 2014 – Hundreds of people gathered Monday night at a Boston hotel to join Cambridge icon Marvin Gilmore – whom many people lovingly call “the mayor of Cambridge” – in celebrating his 90th birthday.

He is an American war hero and lifelong fighter against bigotry. He won U.S. Army medals and received France’s Legion of Honor decoration, the first African-American in New England to do so. And Gilmore has been a key person in helping Greater Boston heal its racial divisions.

His ongoing campaign against discrimination began when he joined the Army as an underage enlistee in World War II.

In the 1960s he traveled with his friend, basketball superstar Bill Russell, to Mississippi, to support enforcement of the then-newly enacted Civil Rights Act of 1964. Gilmore and Russell were threatened with death and violence several times by armed segregationists. Gilmore also brazenly walked into Hollywood superstar Sammy Davis Jr.’s dressing room to sweet-talk the entertainer into headlining a fundraiser concert for the Boston branch of the NAACP.

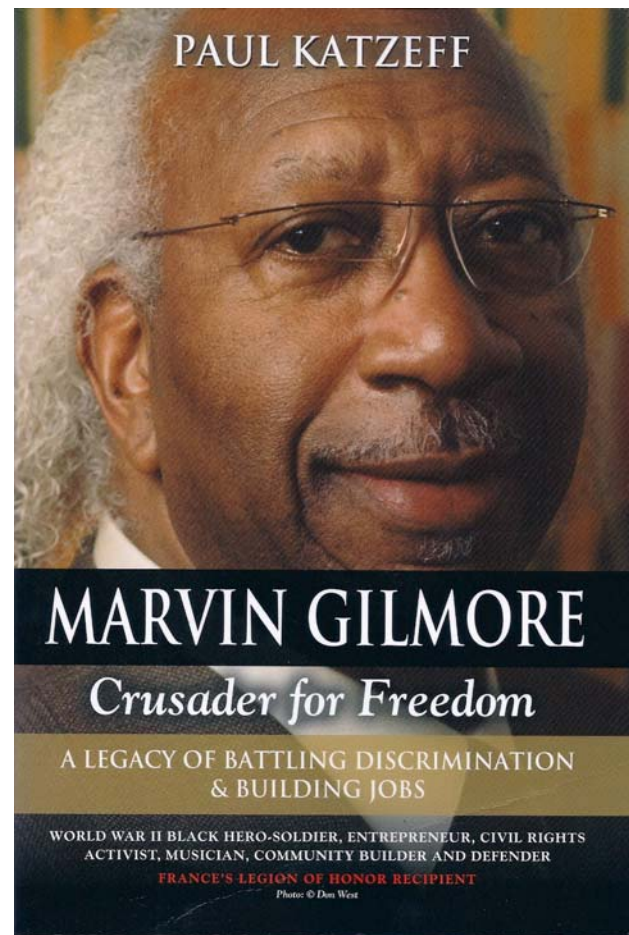
Along the way he began the drive to establish

New England’s first black-owned commercial bank. He did it because banks would not lend to him because, it always seemed, of his skin color. But Gilmore was not just acting out of

spite. He saw a business opportunity. He figured other black business people must be having the same problem. Gilmore’s solution enabled him to obey the old adage: Don’t get mad – get even.

Spotting opportunities is Gilmore’s specialty. Where others saw a worthless slum along Cambridge’s Western Avenue, Gilmore saw an ideal location for a music club that would become as well known for its peaceful, biracial audiences as for its reggae music.

Gilmore’s relationship with Cambridge officials was less harmonious. The newly published biography of Gilmore by Boston-area journalist Paul Katzeff describes his multi-decade friction with Cambridge officials. “They just didn’t want blacks to have any businesses in the city,” Gilmore says.



The cover of Paul Katzeff's new biography of Marvin Gilmore.

His perseverance paid off. “Marvin is the ‘mayor of Cambridge,’” says Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., a professor at Harvard Law School, in the Gilmore biography. “He may not have that title officially, but he is called that because he knows everything about the city, he goes everywhere, is resilient, is part of any movement to enact meaningful change in this city. Who else can describe what Cambridge was like in 1940 from first-hand experience and is still around and can talk about it like it was yesterday?”

The Gilmore biography is filled with anecdotes and historical stories such as how Gilmore captained the campaign to bring jobs and housing to Boston’s Southwest Corridor, instead of the highway sought by federal transportation officials. That was his first undertaking for the Community Development Corporation of Boston, which he still leads.

Gilmore has not only been a champion of rank-and-file African-American workers. He has also been a key player in the decades-long battle to open better-paying executive jobs to African-Americans. He did it through his advocacy of groundbreaking, share-the-wealth development formulas in the 1980s. And he has done it person-by-person.

Deborah Jackson, now President of Cambridge College, was one beneficiary. She says Gilmore supported her 1989 appointment as the first black president and CEO of Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries in Boston.

“...I know what my appointment signaled about diversity,” she says in the Gilmore biography. She is not the only African-American to benefit from Marvin’s support. “As our city of Boston has become more progressive and diverse in some ways, we should never lose sight of people who broke ground for all of us.... Marvin is in that group.... He is in a special, small group of mentors, advocates, and community leaders. And he did this while leading a nonprofit, the CDC, while he was also running private businesses. He is an amazing role model, and an amazing entrepreneur.”

At age 90, Gilmore is still at it today, fighting to help others help themselves. He works with the energy of someone half his age.

I would be happy to speak with you for a story in *The Improper Bostonian* about Gilmore’s impact on Cambridge and Boston. Gilmore is also available for an interview.

“There are many heroes in the story of Boston’s remarkable revival, and one of them is Marvin Gilmore. In fact, his story should be an inspiration to every young person in this country who wants to do great things. A black kid from Cambridge, he overcame unbelievable obstacles in a racist America to succeed in business and, more importantly, as a tireless and relentless civic leader. He is also an inspiration to those of us who are approaching old age – still working, still pushing, still making the world a better place as he celebrates his 90th birthday.”

● *Michael Dukakis, twice Governor of Massachusetts (1975-1979, 1983-1991) and the 1988 Democratic nominee for President of the United States, in Paul Katzeff’s biography of Marvin Gilmore*

You can find more information about the book – including a sample chapter – at:

<http://www.paulkatzeff.com/books/bios/>

There's more information and another sample chapter at:

<http://booklocker.com/books/7656.html>

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