

Wharton takes Memphis mayor's oath, vows to end 'rancor and divisiveness'

By Amos Maki

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There was a period between 9 a.m. and noon on Oct. 26 when A C Wharton Jr. didn't have a job.

He had resigned his position as mayor of Shelby County and was waiting to be sworn in as Memphis mayor.

"I found out what it was like to be unemployed," he said. The exposure was brief.

Wharton assumed the highest elected office in the state's largest city Monday when retired Circuit Court judge George Brown administered the oath of office to him in a ceremony in the Hall of Mayors at City Hall.

The 65-year-old attorney had been mayor of Shelby County for seven years before winning a landslide victory in the Oct. 15 special election to replace former mayor Willie Herenton.

"The citizens of Memphis are why we are here and it is my desire to ensure that every one of them -- every one of you -- is treated with the utmost respect and that every request receives a response," Wharton said.

Wharton, whose campaign theme was "One Memphis," becomes the city's first new mayor in nearly 18 years, replacing the controversial Herenton, who resigned from his record fifth term on July 30 under the cloud of a federal investigation. Herenton did not attend the ceremony Monday.

"I carry a mandate from every neighborhood, Westwood to Raleigh, New Chicago to Cordova, and every community where people want better schools, better jobs, a more efficient government and safer streets," Wharton said.

"The clearest and most universally shared mandates and directives I have heard and received across this community is the desire for me to help bring an end to the rancor and divisiveness that has too often defined our politics and clogged the engine of our forward progress."

That remark drew the biggest ovation of the speech, and applause also accompanied Wharton's praise of outgoing Mayor Pro Tem Myron Lowery, who now returns to the

City Council.

"I believe that people will not soon forget the notable actions he took ... to promote efficiency and to invite people into the processes of city government," Wharton said.

The city Wharton now leads has many of the same urban problems that plagued it when he moved here 36 years ago to succeed George Brown as director of Memphis Area Legal Services.

But Wharton said he would focus on a message "filled with hope, possibility and the highest of aspirations," and would run a "customer-friendly" government.

"I always say that customer service is not a department, it's a state of mind," said Wharton. "We need to see the world through the eyes of our consumers. If we do that, everything will be all right."

Wharton said he would focus immediately on issues such as Bass Pro Shops' pending redevelopment of The Pyramid, and how the city will provide funding to Memphis City Schools.

While Herman Morris has already been sworn in as city attorney, the new mayor and his transition team are operating on a 90-day timeline when it comes to other major personnel decisions.

Under the City Charter, division directors remain in place for the first 90 days of a new administration, unless the new mayor goes to the City Council for consent to remove them. After 90 days, the mayor can remove them at will, but still needs council approval to install successors. For now, Wharton has asked all of the city's division directors and deputy directors to stay on board.

County Commission chairwoman Joyce Avery was sworn in as acting county mayor after Wharton's resignation.

County Commissioner Steve Mulroy presented Wharton with a yellow kitchen broom as a gift.

"It was something I thought you might need when you go over to the city side," Mulroy said.

Wharton's bemused smile matched the moment, and he joked that he wasn't sure which end to use. He first made a motion with the handle, as if he were walloping something -- or someone -- before going to a sweeping motion he said he hoped would do the trick first.

After the City Hall ceremony, as he prepared to go to his new seventh-floor office, Wharton was asked about that broom.

"What I need is one of those big push brooms," Wharton said. "And one with a metal handle."

Excerpts from Monday's events:

— Outgoing Mayor Pro Tem Myron Lowery was standing outside City Hall waiting for A C Wharton to arrive when workers came up to Lowery with some city business. "Let A C do it," Lowery replied.

He said a high point of his nearly three months running the city was a visit he made to WMC-TV Channel 5, where he started out in Memphis as a broadcaster, but against which he eventually won a race-discrimination lawsuit. He enjoyed signing in at the station as mayor, Lowery said: "There's nothing that compares with that."

Wharton said he believes Lowery's second-place finish showed that Memphians crave a new tone in politics: "I daresay because of the way you carried yourself, we have lifted campaigning to a higher level in our great city," Wharton told Lowery.

— Wharton began his first speech as city mayor by referring to a visit he made on Sunday to see his 93-year-old mother near the Lebanon, Tenn., home where he grew up. "She told me to act right and I'll do that as best I can," Wharton said.

— Congressman Steve Cohen was conspicuous at both swearing-in ceremonies on Monday, in contrast to his opponent in next year's 9th Congressional District Democratic primary, former Memphis mayor Willie Herenton -- who did not show at either. Wharton praised Lowery but did not refer at all to Herenton.

— Wharton strayed from his prepared remarks at one point to recall that, in the inaugural Leadership Memphis class, in 1979, a few people adopted a chant. "A C in '83!" came a loud call from the side of the room, beating Wharton to the punch.

Wharton identified the voice as Leadership classmate Dr. Mark Matheny, now the pastor at St. Luke's United Methodist Church near the University of Memphis. "They say a good God may be a little late but He is right on time," Wharton picked up. "I may be a little late getting here, but I am right on time."

— *Amos Maki: 529-2351*



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