

# Q&A with Durham Rep. Michaux

*Rep. Mickey Michaux, D-Durham, is the longest serving African-American representative in the N.C. General Assembly. Durham Voice co-editor Alexis Allston sat down with Michaux to talk about Durham, local politics and a lifetime of service.*

**DV:** What was the best part about growing up in Durham?

**MM:** The best part about growing up in Durham was being part of a diverse community. Durham, like North Carolina, is unique. We didn't have the same civil rights problems as they did further south. Growing up in Durham exposed me to every walk of life you could think of.

It afforded me the opportunity to be in the presence of people who were contemporaries, heroes — the black folk you read about in history. I was influenced by them.

John Hope Franklin and I carried on conversations all the time. Thurgood Marshall, Marian Anderson, I interacted with them. Black artists, doctors, I was exposed to all that in Durham, especially black entrepreneurship.

**DV:** What spurred your decision to go into government and to become an N.C. General Assembly member?

**MM:** Martin Luther King Jr. and I were close friends. In 1956, near the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, I invited Martin to Durham. He said he always wanted to come to Durham. He came in and stayed in my mother and father's house. We would talk and talk.

He said, 'Mickey, we talk about public accommodations and voting rights, but we can't do much unless we're in the seats of power to make the decisions. We have to crack the political power.'

I finally decided that maybe he was right, and in 1964, I ran for a seat in the North Carolina House of Representatives. I lost that election by 120 votes. ... But when a position opened up in 1972, I ran for it and won.

**DV:** What was your relationship with Martin Luther King Jr.?

**MM:** He was a good guy. The man was a friend. He would just come in and get some of my mother's cooking, and we would just sit and talk. We had something synergistic between us. And man, he loved



Rep. Mickey Michaux, D-Durham, was first elected to the N.C. General Assembly in 1972. Michaux, 86, grew up in the Hayti district. (Photo by Alexis Allston.)

my mama's cooking.

**DV:** Any upcoming initiatives that you're excited about?

**MM:** Trying to get those voting rights back on the books. Trying to address grievances that affect communities like Northeast Central Durham. We need better infrastructure and all of that. But I don't know how much longer I'll be around here.

**DV:** What's special about representing the people of Durham in particular?

**MM:** It's the fact that I give back to the community what they've given me. I can right the wrongs in the community. On a state level, I can steer funds toward that community, like federal grants for housing funds, so infrastructure can be bolstered.

**DV:** What's the biggest issue facing Durham residents today? North Carolinians?

**MM:** For Durham: growth. We are growing rapidly at a rate that we had never known in the past. Durham has become a center, and we're getting some crime with that. We need to temper growth. We want to grow in the right direction, and that's determined by the constituency.

For North Carolina: changing attitudes. We have a responsibility to pass laws, but

that doesn't do anything. You can't pass a law to make me love, like or hate you, but you can pass a law to make me respect you. Once we get respect for everybody out there, it's a change of mindset that has to be done.

**DV:** You also were an honoree at this year's African-American History Month Celebration at Antioch Baptist Church. Tell me about that.

**MM:** It was nice. I appreciated it. It's nice to get your roses while you can smell them. But let's not waste time honoring folks; let's get out and do something. If you want to honor me, make sure you get out and vote.

Folks came in to honor me once, I asked, 'How many of you are registered to vote?' I said, 'I only talk to folks registered to vote.' If you're not registered, you can't do anything to help yourself.

**DV:** What would be your advice to young black folks?

**MM:** Learn your history. Learn that where you are today, you just didn't get there. It wasn't handed to you on a platter. There are people that fought and died for whatever you have today. We need history to improve — we need to know that the fight still goes on.