

Trailblazing Isles leader Willou Smith dies

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Willou Copeland Smith, former Glynn County commissioner and state legislator, died Monday. She was 82.

Trailblazer. Community leader. Education advocate. Political party builder. County commissioner. State legislator. Civic-minded. Business woman. Honoree. Mother. Wife. Harpist.

All titles and words that are a snug fit for “The Lady of Glynn,” a moniker used to describe the St. Simons Island resident in a proclamation by the Glynn County Commission honoring her years of service.

Smith was the islands’ representative on the Glynn County Commission from 1980 to 1986, serving one year as its chair. She left the commission and was elected to the state House, chairing the Minority Caucus one year during her time in the seat, 1987 through 1996.

Her days of shaping state policy extended beyond her retirement from the legislature. She was appointed by Gov. Zell Miller to the state board of education in 1996, serving one year as its vice chair before her stint ended in 2001.

Add one more title to her long list: Helper. She was that and more to Gussie Gammon of St. Simons Island.

“Willou was always special to me,” Gammon said in a statement to The News. “I was widowed in 1991 and worked tirelessly for the Republican Party, including president of Golden Isles Republican Women’s Club. Whenever I had a problem, she was there for me.”

When Smith returned to Glynn County on weekends during the weeks the Georgia General Assembly was in session, Gammon made it a point to attend her Saturday morning briefings in Brunswick.

“It was a learning experience to know what was going on in Atlanta,” she said.

“She was honest and when she didn’t have the answer, she would get back to me.”

In addition to supporting efforts to improve education as a member of the legislature, Smith took an active interest in the community college and was a past chair of the College of Coastal Georgia Foundation.

When serving on the county commission, in addition to being the only woman on the seven-member board, she was the only Republican.

Commenting in a 2006 article in The News on the scarcity of women on the county commission, Smith said: “You have to be willing to put in the hours and the time it takes and to be knowledgeable of the other commissioners’ issues. A woman can certainly do it.”

A business woman, Smith owned several restaurants and engaged in other entrepreneurial enterprises.

In 2004, she was the recipient of the A.W. Jones Sr. Award, a prestigious award presented to an individual for dedicated leadership and outstanding service to Brunswick and the Golden Isles. Her contributions to the community also were recognized with her inclusion among those chosen for the 2000 YWCA Tribute to Women.

Other honors bestowed upon her included the Georgia Clean and Beautiful Woman of the Year Award in 1981 for her efforts in organizing the St. Simons Clean and Beautiful campaign.

In 2011, the state named the portion of GA 303 between U.S. 17 and Altama Avenue in honor of Smith. State Rep. Alex Atwood, R-St. Simons Island, introduced the resolution naming the highway segment.

“A native of Glynn County and a ‘product’ of Glynn County schools, Mrs. Smith is an outstanding role model for the young people of our community,” Atwood wrote in the resolution.

“As a past member of the Safe Harbor Advisory Board, member of the Brunswick-Golden Isles Chamber of Commerce, and past chairman of the Coastal Area Planning and Development Commission, Mrs. Smith has made a lasting contribution to her community. She has also served as an advisory director of the Coastal Bank of Georgia. In 1990, she was among 15 women honored by the Coastal Georgia Historical Society in a photographic exhibition called “Women of South Coastal Georgia, a Current History Celebration.”

Atwood also wrote “while in office she was known as the ‘go to’ commissioner and legislator because her highest priority was constituent service.” The resolution noted that she was a trustee of the Leadership Georgia program from 1983 to 1986.

In 1999, Smith was named executive director of the local United Way, serving at the wheel of the organization to 2001.

A member of Christ Church, Frederica, she served three years on the Vestry and is a former president of the Daughters of the King.

Smith attended Glynn Academy and majored in music therapy at Florida State University. She was an accomplished harpist, playing for her church and at select social events.

She and her husband Bill celebrated 60 years of marriage in July 2021. They have two children, Cal Smith and Leigh Ann Barrick, and three grandsons.

Gammon said she will miss seeing the couple on Friday nights.

“Purposely I would go to Frederica House on Friday night to see Bill and Willou,” she said, noting she always felt welcomed with them.

“This was one classy lady.”