



COCKTAILS

WITH
THE

Queen





by Charles D. Springfield
photography by Dan Bishop

“The name just stuck,” said Cecilia Gilbert, detailing how she garnered her well-known moniker “The Queen.”

The Permits and Communications Manager at Milwaukee’s Department of Public Works says her nickname was coined by Amy Chionchio back in 1991 when they worked together in the marketing section of the Department of City Development. Gilbert says the president and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Milwaukee was in awe of just how many people in Milwaukee that personally knew Gilbert, that Gilbert personally knew and just how many people depended on her knowledge, wisdom and guidance.

Like many other people in the city, as Chionchio noticed, I knew the “The Queen” too by seeing her around Milwaukee at various downtown hotspots, at fundraisers and at mutual friends’ parties. Although we never had the opportunity to have a formal conversation, I noticed she navigated the city with a certain charm and presence; just like other dignitaries, like business leaders, authors, world-renown artists and Grammy-nominated singers/song writers in the city – but without all the pomp and circumstance.

It wasn’t until I sat down for an extended tête-à-tête over an undisclosed amount of cocktails that I realized that the majestic designation provided to Gilbert was as appropriate for her as her luxurious fur coat is for Wisconsin’s winters.

The Queen of the People

Her career with the City of Milwaukee started more than 30 years ago. Gilbert says that holding various positions with the city over the years – ranging from a community relation analyst and legislative assistant to common council liaison and marketing program coordinator – has vastly expanded her network.

“By working for the city for so long, you get to know everyone,” she said, followed by a deep, raspy laugh. “People are so amazed by the amount of (city employees) I know by name and even their phone extensions.”

Gilbert’s current position has her serving as the spokesperson for the Department of Public Works (DPW) and also managing event permits provided to residents and businesses in Milwaukee. Preston Cole, current director of operations for DPW, hand-picked Gilbert to become the face of the DPW after a couple of years on the job. The high-profile aspect of her job keeps her busy working with the media to keep residents informed on the status of snow removal, construction updates, road closures and the list goes on and on. While the permits portion of her job has her managing the event permits department, which is responsible for issuing permits ranging from small block parties to large fundraising walk/runs.

“Since I’ve been in several different departments throughout the city, I have a working knowledge of how those departments operate,” Gilbert said. “It has made me uniquely qualified for my current position and has helped me create and maintain a strong relationship with the media, while also giving residents the up-to-the-minute updates that they seek from the city.”

Gilbert is so informed, in fact, that she receives calls from people about everything under the sun, from parking tickets to annual festivals. The callers know that if she doesn’t have the answer, she can quickly find someone who does. She doesn’t mind, however. She takes pride in taking the time to explain things step-by-step, so the residents and organizations are properly informed.

“The city is here to serve people and I’m just here to help,” she said.

Despite always being on call for her job, she manages to find time to enjoy herself. Her long-standing connection with local businesses has added an extra layer to her being treated like royalty around town. She can barely enter a room, especially when it’s located downtown, without being stopped several times by colleagues, business leaders, acquaintances or close friends. Her entrance into an establishment is like a royal promenade of “how are you” and “don’t forget to come to” such and such event.

But while she might have access to VIP treatment and areas, one of her favorite places to be is with her grandson Justin. The eldest of her two grandchildren, Justin, is frequently in tow as Gilbert hops around from farmer’s market and the Summerfest grounds to museums and Third Ward restaurants in search for a fabulous Kiddy Cocktail (lemon-lime soda and grenadine syrup, topped with cherries).

Family is very important to Gilbert. Her mother was a single mother when the family moved to Milwaukee while Gilbert was in the fifth grade. Her father remained in Little Rock. Gilbert speaks to her mother on a regular basis to this day and also has three brothers, one of whom passed away last year.

She relishes the fact that she was raised in Milwaukee at a time when neighbors looked after each other and when social centers served as after school havens for kids to hang out and burning off a little energy with a little roller skating.

“We all grew up in Milwaukee and have fond memories of how we spent our childhood,” Gilbert said speaking on behalf of her brothers. “Whether it was finding bottles and turning them in for money in order to go to local swimming pools or movie theaters, we were supposed to be watching each other.”

Her mother, Lorine – aka Lodie – worked hard to make sure that everyone had everything that they needed. She eventually bought a house and took in cousins and friends over the years.

“Her generosity had a huge influence on me,” Gilbert reflects. “I used to tease her by saying ‘welcome to Lodie’s Hotel for the Homeless.’ I remember her getting up and taking the bus to Junior House, a clothing manufacturer on the near south side on those very cold mornings, sometime getting frost bite. She taught me that if you want something you have to work to get it. She was a very determined person.”

Gilbert went on to have a small family. As a single mother herself, she and her son Richard, worked together as a team when he was growing up to make sure the household ran smoothly. She instilled that same strong work ethic in Richard that her mother ingrained in her.

“He learned to wash his own clothes at an early age and got a job as soon as he could get a work permit,” she remembers. He worked Saturdays at Galst Food market. He has worked almost continuously at Summerfest from the time he was 15, except for a couple of years when he was in the Air Force and a summer when he had knee surgery.”

Her Royal Influence

Gilbert is a big fan of Milwaukee. She has always encouraged her family – and her extended family of friends and colleagues – to open up their eyes, minds and hearts to the possibility of what can be here in the city. And as Queen, she uses the arts as her platform to influence others, particularly when it comes to appreciating the arts.

“I grew up interested in the arts,” she said. “One of my teachers, also a part-time actress, focused my attention on the arts at a young age.”

After that introduction, she has been hooked ever since. She has provided public relations services for the “Black Arts Summer Experience” to promote an original production of the “The Bagman’s Gift”; worked with African American theater company, Handsberry – Sands, to promote “Quiet as It’s Kept” and other productions.

She said her friendship with Cindy Moran, who does marketing and public relations with the Milwaukee Rep, led to Gilbert serving on the board. Even after her tenure on the board was over, Gilbert continued to have an influence on The Rep by inspiring African-American playwright Kevin Ramsey to write an original play, “Grafton City Blues,” based on Paramount Records.

“I am really proud of that,” she said. “He called me his muse.”

Her love of the arts also led her to later work on the music committee of Jazz in the Park, as one of the original members of the advisory board that created Radio for Milwaukee and as a

member of the International Arts Festival Advisory Board.

“I want to make the arts more appealing and less intimidating to the masses,” she mentioned. In her downtime, she loves reading, watching “True Blood” and “Big Love” on HBO or checking out a play. She also makes it a point to see music acts like Colin Hay, originally from Men at Work, whom she has met during his many visits to Milwaukee.

A Mentor Fit for a Queen

Becoming Milwaukee royalty is not something one usually achieves on his or her own. Most people need a little help. And Ben Barkin, one of the best known public relations men in Milwaukee and possibly in the country, helped Gilbert realize her true potential.

When he was alive, his company, which he founded in 1945, was one of the first PR firms in the state. His clients included some of the biggest companies in Wisconsin. In 1971, Barkin was chosen the best publicist in the U.S. in a poll of city editors at 100 of the nation’s largest newspapers. On behalf of his main client, the Jos. Schlitz Brewing Co., Barkin organized entertainment extravaganzas like New York Philharmonic concerts in Central Park, the Newport Jazz Festival, Los Angeles Street Scene as well as Milwaukee’s Great Circus Parade.

Gilbert and Barkin developed a strong mentor-mentee relationship while working on the Great Circus Parade in the mid 80s.

“He was this larger than life individual and the epitome of a PR person,” Gilbert reflects. “He knew people like Albert Einstein and Martin Luther King Jr., and even had Duke Ellington to his home to play piano.”

Barkin had an uncanny ability to make things happen, Gilbert said.

“He’s someone who definitely had an impact on who I am today,” she said. “By taking me under his wing, he actually helped further build my confidence.”

She began to fully realize her potential and develop deep faith in her abilities through working with Barkin. Since he believed in her so much, she learned to believe in herself more.

Gilbert was working with Barkin when she noticed that there weren’t many African Americans represented in the Great Circus parade. Thinking she could change that, Gilbert did a little research that uncovered a very interesting find: Ephraim Williams was America’s first African-American circus owner and got his start in Milwaukee.

Williams called himself “The Black P.T. Barnum,” and his railroad circus traveled throughout the upper Midwest. He was a legend in the late 1880s. He started out as a shoe-shine guy in Milwaukee and began his show-biz career by training a horse to do “math tricks” in the early 1880s. Those performances won him applause in local opera houses and Williams soon took his show on the road. He eventually owned three circuses with more than 100 people. Williams became wealthy, but his circuses eventually closed due to bad weather and finances in the early 1900s.

Armed with this knowledge, Gilbert decided that this history had to be acknowledged in the Circus Parade. She partnered with Judy Jones to develop a concept based on Williams’ legacy.

The African-American “Gilbert & Jones” troupe joined by “Ephraim Williams” appeared in Great Circus Parades from 1986 to 2003. The group became known for its parade antics where its characters were the only parade participants allowed to get down off their carriage and interact with the crowds because they were considered entertainers, not clowns. The troupe also made an appearance in the 2009 Great Circus Parade with new costumes.

Being an educator and purveyor of African American history and theatre in Milwaukee just might be one of Gilbert’s biggest legacies.

“Although Milwaukee isn’t perfect, there are very good things going on in the community” Gilbert said. “We have a lot to be proud of and we have a very rich history, including African American history. At one time African Americans owned the land where the Grand Avenue stands (an African American sold his hotel to John Plankinton) and much more.”

However, there is always room for improvement in Milwaukee, she said.

“When my grandchildren grow up, I want Milwaukee to be the kind of place where you can be whatever you want to be and not feel you need to go to New York, Los Angeles or Chicago to ‘make it’ in your chosen field,” she laments. “I want Milwaukee to be a place where you see all kinds of people in business and making choices for the betterment of the city. I also want Milwaukee to be a place where crime is low, everyone has a chance to receive a good education and have access to good paying job and good housing – no matter who you are.”

It just takes people getting involved, if they feel there is something that needs to be changed, she believes.

And that’s why she is the Queen. She is an active participant in her own life. She decides what makes her happy and fulfilled. And she inspires people to do the same. ✱

“I like where I am and I like what I’m doing,” she says.

- PARKING

“Read the signs!” she said. Many parking pitfalls or frustrations can be resolved by simply taking a few minutes to read the signs. If residents do fall victim to parking problems, they should know that the City is willing to work with them to resolve parking issues. If you receive a ticket that is flagrantly wrong, (e.g., you have until 6:00 p.m. on a meter but received a ticket at 5:55 p.m.), you should contact Parking Information Desk right away at **414.286-8350**. Also, residents can pay their parking tickets online as well purchase their night parking permits. **milwaukee.gov/mpw**

- SNOW FILLED STREETS

During Snow Emergencies, residents have the option of parking on school playgrounds from the hours of 7p.m. to 7a.m. in some neighborhoods while the streets are being plowed. A list can also be found on the Department's website or by calling the Parking Information Desk. Residents now have the option to sign up for text alerts to inform them when there is a snow emergency or when the 4 inch parking regulation will be enforced.

- RECYCLING

The City of Milwaukee actually makes money when residents recycle and that money can help reduce various costs for residents. Recycling not only can save residents money, it lowers the amount of waste that is transported to landfills and it helps create local Green Collar jobs.

- EVENT PERMITS

When planning a special event in Milwaukee, be sure to secure an event permit at least two to three months in advance. There are a number of city entities that must be informed of events, like the police and fire departments. “If a street is closed off, the police and emergency crews need to know to avoid those streets when responding to an emergency,” Gilbert said. Some events require a series of approvals throughout the city, which could take some additional time. For example, events with music may require additional permits. Block party events, which have grown tremendously in the city and are free to hold, must be approved by the majority of neighbors and an alderman then signs off on it.

- COMING EVENTS

Check the website to find out about the East Side Street Sweeping Program, April through October; Project Clean & Green, an opportunity to get rid of clutter from your basements and garages for free and a list of major Special Events in the City.

milwaukee.gov/mpw 414.286.CITY