

The Post and Courier

High Profile: ERIKA HARRISON

Young attorney recovers from political loss, steps up to serve Charleston community

By [Dan Conover](#)

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When the last ballot had been counted, the spindly electronic voting machines folded and packed away, Erika Harrison introduced herself to a new acquaintance: defeat.

She'd spent the first 28 years of her life winning: class president and student body president at Summerville High School, lieutenant governor during her stint at Palmetto Girls' State, then off to Wake Forest for college and law school and back to the Lowcountry to begin a career as a bright, civically active attorney.

But election night is the ultimate political reality check, and Harrison's campaign this fall for Charleston City Council, her first run for real public office, fell six votes short of forcing a two-way runoff for the District 3 seat.



Photo by Mic Smith

The Post and Courier

Erika Harrison, an uptown resident and a downtown attorney, stands on the elevated sidewalk that spans Charleston's Crosstown Expressway. The expressway divides the city, and City Council District 3, into two distinct identities.

Which is where things get interesting. Yes, Harrison has all the markings of a potential leader,

and, yes, she already serves on multiple boards and commissions (including a seat on the city's contentious Board of Architectural Review). But you never know how that first setback will affect a person.

"It all really depends on how you respond to your loss," said Charleston attorney and political junky Aaron Polkey, a longtime friend and adviser of Harrison's. "If someone loses graciously ... it can open the door to bigger and better things."

Enter running

Harrison caught even her friends off guard last summer when she announced plans to run for a council seat.

Her biggest hurdle: Harrison wasn't even a resident of the city before April, when she moved into the Carolina Street duplex she'd purchased in December.

The move landed her smack in the middle of a sprawling district bisected by the Crosstown

Expressway and intersected by lines of race, culture and class. District 3 traditionally has elected black candidates, but the past decade has seen it grow increasingly diverse as whites - many of them working-class, creative professionals "from off" - infiltrated the Uptown neighborhoods of North Central and Wagener Terrace.

Which made Harrison something of a November wild card, a candidate connected to many of her district's multiple identities: both a native and a newcomer, a black woman and an urban professional.

But it was her instant involvement in the life of her new community that sold West Side Neighborhood Association President Arthur Peter Lawrence.

The association gave the 20-something attorney some needed credibility (and kept her from unwittingly campaigning at a few neighborhood crack houses) as she walked the district with Lawrence as her guide.

Harrison figures she knocked on more than 2,000 doors this fall, getting to know a district whose constituents range from millionaires to lifelong public housing residents.

"I learned humility," she said during an interview at Turner Padgett Graham & Laney, the East Bay law firm that hired her last summer. "I learned that you have to be humble enough to serve people. I learned that how I live and how others live is completely different. I learned that people have stories that they can share with me that I would probably never experience."

Yet her sudden appearance on the scene sparked suspicions and theories.

"It was, 'Who is she working for? Is she a plant by the mayor's campaign?' It was actually even funnier when The Post and Courier ran its editorial picks (endorsing incumbent James Lewis). That's when people realized that I wasn't anybody's candidate."

The overachiever

Harrison grew up as an only child in Summerville, and she came by her driven personality honestly. Her father was president of the North Charleston NAACP in the 1980s, and her mother was a 30-year Summerville teacher who bounced energetically from one civic involvement to another, often serving as president of whatever group she joined.

About Erika

NAME: Erika V. Harrison.

AGE: 28.

RESIDES: Carolina Street, Charleston.

STATUS: Single.

HOMETOWN: Summerville.

PARENTS: Gordon and Ethel Harrison.

EDUCATION: Summerville High School, Wake Forest University and Wake Forest University School of Law.

PROFESSION: Attorney.

BOARDS AND AFFILIATIONS: YMCA Greater Charleston; Jenkins Institute for Children; Charleston Board of Architectural Review; Thurgood Marshall Law Society, president; and American Legion Auxiliary's Palmetto Girls' State.

PERSONAL GOALS: Continue to grow and mature into my adulthood and remain optimistic about my future and place in this city.

PROFESSIONAL GOALS: In the future, to hold and work in a public office, but in the present, to spearhead the YMCA Youth Scholarship Campaign and reach our target fundraising goal.

WHAT CHARLESTON NEEDS MOST TODAY: To reconnect its neighbors and neighborhoods.

BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT: As our city has progressed, we have created a diaspora of African-American residents because of the disparate prices of homes in this city and quality of services. Additionally, we are missing the next generation of African-American families in downtown. My generation is raising their families in other locales, and we are not returning home.

WHERE'S YOUR BALANCING POINT BETWEEN PRAGMATISM AND OPTIMISM?: Faith and hope are points of balance. Without the two, I would probably lose my purpose and belief and tip the scales to pessimism and self-absorption.

Harrison emerged from childhood with excellent references, an unvarnished optimism and a sturdy belief in what she could accomplish when she applied herself.

Not that her views didn't evolve. While she was away at Wake Forest University, Harrison dreamed of becoming a lobbyist, a career that she believed meant developing helpful, public-interest legislation. Experience taught otherwise, and she shifted her professional focus to practicing law.

Any impractical aspirations she might have entertained about life after law school were erased in 2004 by \$100,000 in student loan debt. Harrison accepted a job with a Charleston firm, moved in with her parents and began saving money. By December 2006, she had her debts under control and enough in the bank to buy her Carolina Street duplex.

Whatever the origins of her personal story, there's a basic belief in meritocracy that animates it. "I don't take 'no' very well," she said. "So my goal in life has always been to excel. It was to be driven enough to do well. So that no one would ever have the opportunity to tell me no."

Harrison's horizon

Harrison doesn't rule out another District 3 run or deny her interest in a political career. She's not exactly flying under the radar, either: In her highest-profile appointment, Harrison finds herself advocating a more progressive attitude toward nontraditional architecture on the BAR, voicing ideas that sometimes put her in conflict with the city's Old Guard preservationists.

"I think what we have always done is look to our historic models. But I think for some reason we're opposed to creating new historic models."

That's not the kind of stance that you'd expect from a Charleston attorney with political ambitions, but Harrison understands that many of her peers are, like her, Charleston outsiders.

Lawrence sees them as the leading edge of an approaching wave.

"We need young people to step forward," he said. "This was the first election that we had young people pick up and challenge those incumbents. I think (Harrison) is a young person who could fulfill that vision."

Polkey agrees, though he believes Harrison is growing in ways that others might not see.

"The 'wound-up-ness,' if that's even a word, is going away," he said.

"There's more balance to her now.

"She's become a lot more confident in herself. She's much more comfortable in her own skin

now. She wasn't timid before, but I think now she exudes an air of confidence that comes from being more relaxed.

"The feeling I get from Erika is that she still intends to be part of the discussion in this city," Polkey said, "and I think the way she's carried herself (since the election) is exactly the way someone should act (after a defeat)."

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