

# *moving* forward

**New Detroit mayor comes  
from a long line  
of Wayne State alumni**



TIMOTHY L. HUGHES

by Sheryl James

**O**n the morning of Sept. 19, 2008, the man who momentarily would become Detroit's 61<sup>st</sup> mayor stepped into the 13<sup>th</sup>-floor auditorium of the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center in Detroit to take his oath of office. Before he took his second step, the packed auditorium erupted into wild applause.

That pretty much set the tone for the administration of Detroit's new mayor and Wayne State alumnus, Kenneth V. Cockrel Jr., FCPA '88.

It all became official at about 9:15 a.m., when Sixth U.S. District Court of Appeals Judge Damon J. Keith, M.Law '56, Honorary '73, administered the oath of office.

After that solemn moment,

Cockrel, who was tapped as interim mayor because he was City Council president, uttered his first words as leader of a city bruised by a text-messaging scandal that forced Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick out of office.

"Today, the road ahead is the road less traveled," Cockrel told his audience. "From this moment on, the past is the past as we as a community, as a city and as a region are moving forward. This is our time for hope and renewal. This is our time to breathe life back into a city. We are doing so with strategy and focus, because we have much to do.

"And because of the events of the past several months, it is critical that we find closure,

mend our wounds, treat our bumps and bruises and heal as a city. It is also important that after that, we go to work.

"As we bring this sad chapter in our city's history to a close, we must also move forward."

Cockrel's tenure as mayor will last at least through February, when a primary will be held to elect the person who will finish Kilpatrick's current term; then a regular election will elect the city's next mayor.

That could be Cockrel, if he wins his bid to fill both of those upcoming roles. But that may be a difficult task; by filing deadline, 18 people had announced their intention to run for Detroit mayor.

But all of that was weeks ahead as Cockrel, true to his

inaugural words, got right to work and immediately earned praise for his even-handed, calm leadership. He faced a city in financial shambles and a city government filled with people appointed by a now-disgraced mayor. But, true to his reputation as a fair man with what one reporter called a “surgical” approach, Cockrel announced the dismissal of only a few administrators, and quickly named their replacements.

His first and most visible replacement, which also drew applause, tapped another Wayne State University alumnus, James Barren, as chief of the Detroit Police Department. He succeeded Ella Bully-Cummings, who announced her retirement when Kilpatrick resigned his office.

Barren, M.CLAS '85, M.Ed. '88, M.Ed. '91, Ph.D. '99, a 31-year veteran of the police department and known as a “cop’s cop,” has a Ph.D. in counseling from Wayne State.

Cockrel the same day announced an equally popular selection of former U.S. Attorney Saul Green as deputy mayor. Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy called Green “an impeccable choice.” Soon after came the appointment of former Auditor General Joe Harris as the city’s chief financial officer. Other early appointments have met with consistent praise.

Cockrel is in many ways a comforting choice for post-scandal leadership. He is a Detroit native from a well-known Detroit family of Wayne State alumni.

His father, now-deceased, was attorney, community activist and former Detroit City Councilman Kenneth V. Cockrel Sr., CLAS '64, J.D. '67.

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He was considering running against an aging and then-ill former Mayor Coleman Young in 1989 when he died of a heart attack at age 50, according to a recent *Detroit Free Press* article.

Mayor Cockrel’s mother, Carol Cockrel, Ed. '69, is a retired teacher. The mayor’s stepmother, Sheila Cockrel, Mont. '80, M.Urb.Labor '85, serves on Detroit City Council. Cockrel’s sister Katherine Cockrel, CLAS '08

received the David D. Henry Award at graduation this year.

Mayor Cockrel’s wife, Kimberly Lanette, FPCA '89, M.Ed. '02, also graduated from Wayne State. They have five children.

But Mayor Cockrel’s accomplishments speak for themselves. A cum laude graduate of Wayne State, Cockrel earned a bachelor of arts degree in print journalism and worked for several newspapers, including the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Grand Rapids Press*, before entering politics.

According to his biographical sketch, he was a graduate in the inaugural class of the Michigan Political Leadership Program at Michigan State University and of the Program for State and Local Government Officials at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Cockrel worked for a short time for Wayne State before being elected to Wayne County Commission in 1994. In 1997, he was elected, at 32, to Detroit City Council. He was the youngest person in Detroit’s history to be elected to council. By 2001, he had won re-election and was president pro tem. After winning his third term in 2005, Cockrel became council president.

Throughout his career, Cockrel has championed various causes, including the relief

of overcrowded jails; reducing concentrations of liquor stores and pawn shops; improving group homes and foster care facilities; and funding issues, among others.

But nothing could have fully prepared Cockrel for the scandal-racked, crisis-ridden, debt-stressed city he now oversees. If he was nervous, he did not show that during that first public address in September.

He spoke of finishing the city’s audits, “so we don’t lose any more money from the State of Michigan and other sources.” He endorsed finalizing a plan to expand Cobo Hall and continuing the push for mass transit in southeastern Michigan.

Cockrel also heralded green Detroit, referring to his role the past two years as the chair of the Detroit City Council’s Green Task Force.

“Some would argue that in the face of all the problems Detroit faces, a green agenda should be a low priority,” he says. “I argue that a green agenda is critical for developing a strategy for the purchase of environmentally friendly products and services that will save the city money while saving our planet. I argue that a green agenda can create green jobs for our citizens who so desperately need them.”

Cockrel went on to talk about creating a business-friendly climate, cleaning up



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**Kenneth V. Cockrel Jr., FPCA '88, at a reception held at Wayne State to congratulate him on his new position: "This is our time to breathe life back into the city."**

the city, continuing Angel's Night and reclaiming the streets of Detroit from crime. Referring back to his father's fierce fight to abolish a 1970s special police task force that was too heavy-handed and "whose real agenda later proved to be the extermination of young black males," Cockrel says his father "saw first-hand what can happen when a police force operates unbridled and unchecked. He recognized mistakes that we cannot afford to repeat."

Criminals, however, should not assume any such tolerance. To them, Cockrel says, "We are coming after you. And we will get you."

Even if he does not survive the February primary to finish out Kilpatrick's term, Cockrel will have served a kind of Gerald Ford-style role in advancing the healing so badly needed in his home city.

He has done so with some personality, too. In his closing remarks that September

day, he acknowledged he is "a geek," who loves watching documentaries, movies, and deleted scenes. His final words, he said, "is some geek speak that I think we can all relate to:

"There's a quote in the film *Terminator: Judgment Day* that goes something like this: 'The future is not set. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves.' In my view, what that means is that Detroit's fate is in our hands. We can fall into the abyss or rise into the heavens. That choice is up to us."

The mayor asked for the help of all citizens as the city enters "uncharted territory. No mayor has ever had to ask so much of his citizens as I will have to ask of all of you.... Let's make our fate, and make it a bright one. And let us boldly go where no city has gone before." ♦

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***Sheryl James is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.***



## new police chief is 4-time alumnus

Mayor Kenneth Cockrel Jr. named James Barren, M.CLAS '85, M.Ed. '88, M.Ed. '91, Ph.D. '99, the new police chief. It was one of Cockrel's first appointments.

Barren has a long list of credentials and degrees and the practical experience to go with it. He began his 31-year career with the Detroit Police Department in 1973 when he was 22. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Medal of Valor. He trained with the FBI, U.S. Secret Service and other agencies as various needs, such as fighting terrorism, arose. He has led units in most of the department's special units, including the Detroit Police Strike Force Section, Special Response Team, Aviation United and the Mounted Unit.

Barren's words to the press Sept. 19, when Mayor Cockrel announced his appointment, reflected his distinguished past – and his focus for the future.

"I believe in leading from the front," he says. "...I look forward to this opportunity. I know we face many challenges, but I am positive we can restore the faith of the department. I want to bring morale and credibility back to the police department. I want to work as one team to make our streets safer. "