

PICTURE PERFECT



A PORTRAIT OF ALBERT N. JOHNSON, the first African-American mayor in New Mexico, is unveiled Saturday at City Hall. Standing from left to right is artist of the charcoal portrait, Ben Hazard, and Johnson's son, Albert Jr., wife, Elmira, and son, Kerry. Johnson served as a member of the City Council from 1968 to 1976 and mayor from 1976 to 1980.

PHOTOS BY ROBIN ZIELINSKI/SUN-NEWS

Portrait honors legacy of state's first African-American mayor

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FOR THE SUN-NEWS

LAS CRUCES — The official portrait of former Las Cruces Mayor Albert N. Johnson, drawn with charcoal by a renowned artist, was unveiled to the public Saturday in a ceremony at City Hall that celebrated his legacy of service to the community.

The first African American mayor in New Mexico, Johnson was elected to the Las Cruces City Commission in 1968 and served as mayor from 1976 to 1980. He was elevated to mayor by fellow council members in an era before the public voted for mayor.

Mayor Ken Miyagishima, in conjunction with the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs, hosted the ceremony where community residents, area dignitaries and Johnson's family members from throughout the country, gathered to see the official portrait revealed and share memories and stories about his life and work.

A supporter of parks, youth and senior citizens facilities, Johnson was a primary driving force behind the construction of the Thomas Branigan Memorial Library. The Meerscheidt Recreation and Munson Senior centers were also constructed during his tenure.

Although Johnson died in December 1984, his legacy lives on.



THE NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY GOSPEL CHOIR, conducted by D. Bobbie Green, performs, "I Walk With the King," on Saturday during the unveiling of an official portrait of former mayor Albert N. Johnson at City Hall.

A statue of the former mayor stands in Albert Johnson Park, located in front of the Branigan Library, and now his portrait will be displayed in the lobby of City Hall.

The large, framed portrait was carefully affixed to a wall in City Hall's vestibule Saturday, where it will remain permanently for residents and visitors to see upon entering the building, Miyagishima said.

Renowned artist Ben Hazard, known for his portrait-like charcoal drawings and whose work

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Mesilla considers hike in utility rates

SUN-NEWS REPORT

LAS CRUCES — On the heels of Mesilla's first ever property tax increase, town trustees will now begin consideration of a proposal to increase monthly utility rates charged to residents and business owners for water, wastewater and solid waste collection services.

Altogether, the proposed monthly rates could increase by at least \$1.07 for most residents, and 95 cents a month for senior citizens.

A first reading of the proposals to increase the rates for those three utility services will be considered by the Mesilla board of trustees at its 6 p.m. meeting Tuesday at Mesilla Town Hall. The first reading means that the proposal will be presented to the trustees for initial discussions, but the board will not formally vote on the proposed increases.

Town Clerk Nicholas Eckert said the tentative timeline for getting approval for the increases from trustees could be tailored to coincide with the start of Mesilla's new fiscal year, on July 1.

"If approved, the new ordinance would go into effect immediately, but any new rates wouldn't take effect until July 1," Eckert said.

The proposed increases would coincide with the trustees' approval of Mesilla's preliminary operating budget for the upcoming 2013 fiscal year. Trustees adopted the budget — and an increase in the mill levy assessment charged to Mesilla property

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► To see a copy of the agenda for Tuesday's Mesilla board of trustees meeting and a copy of proposed monthly rate increases Mesilla trustees will consider for water, wastewater and solid waste, go to lcsun-news.com and click on the link on top of this story.

NMSU's Confucius Institute helps high school student shine in competition



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also hangs in the White House, was commissioned by the state Office of African American Affairs to create the portrait.

"I am so honored to have done this portrait," Hazard told those in attendance after the charcoal drawing of Johnson was revealed.

Having exhibited in galleries, museums and educational institutions throughout America and at the World Fair in Osaka, Japan, Hazard is known internationally for his artwork.

An Africana Studies professor at the University of New Mexico, he has also taught art at the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, Merritt and Laney community college in Oakland, among other institutions.

Calling the state Office of African American Affairs "keepers of truth," Hazard praised its service to the African American community and its efforts to educate and inform residents throughout the state.

After commissioning the portrait's creation, the state Office of African American Affairs in November asked Alfred Rucks, Johnson's cousin, to organize a ceremony to celebrate its unveil-

ing.

"I've been working on this event almost every day and night since then," Rucks said with a smile. "The most difficult part was making sure all of (Johnson's) family from all over the country could be here on this day. It was all worth it to see so many come together to remember and honor his legacy."

Johnson's family members from Charlotte, N.C.; Atlanta, Austin, Texas; and cities in Ohio, Tennessee and New Jersey, traveled thousands of miles to witness the portrait's unveiling and celebrate the legacy of New Mexico's first African American mayor, he said.

As those in attendance reminisced and enjoyed refreshments following the ceremony, Rucks said, "Many people ask me how Albert got involved in politics. The most important thing to him was to improve this city and make Las Cruces a better place to live."

Rucks explained that Johnson knew that becoming involved in local politics was the way for him to help ensure improvement and change throughout his community.

"He left his mark in many ways, both on Las Cruces and the state, and this (portrait) puts the seal on it," Rucks said.

Raised in Nashville, Tenn.,

Johnson earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College, now Tennessee State University, and was employed as a civil engineer at White Sands Missile Range. He married Elmira Daniel in 1959 and was the father of three sons.

His leadership and service to the North Mesquite Street Church of Christ in Las Cruces is recognized by many today. Johnson also served as president of the Doña Ana County Branch NAACP, chairman of the state Human Rights Commission and chairman of the Judicial Standards Commission.

Throughout the morning ceremony, the New Mexico State University Gospel Choir, conducted by Bobbie Green, filled the City Council Chambers with music, including patriotic songs and hymns.

Many, including Miyagishima, Rucks and Johnson's three sons, shared thoughts, stories and memories, some humorous and others more serious, regarding the former mayor's work in civic affairs and his strong connection with his family and community.

Johnson's second oldest son, Kerry Johnson, recalled the months leading up to his father's initial election as a city commissioner in 1968.

Although he was a mere 5 years old at the time, Kerry remembered seeing his father's picture on pamphlets distributed throughout Las Cruces neighborhoods, bumper stickers and pins and realizing that something exciting was happening.

Of the day following the election, he recalled, "I was getting ready for school and Mom told me, 'Your dad won! I thought, 'Did we win money? Or maybe some toys?'"

As he grew older and witnessed the many positive changes his father made in Las Cruces, Kerry said he began to understand his father's important role in the community.

"It was impressive to me," he said. "As I got older, I developed an even deeper respect for my father, what he did for this city and what he believed in."

After a drive-by shooting shattered a window at the Johnson residence one evening, Kerry spoke to his father, who was in Ft. Worth, Texas, over the phone. "He asked me, 'Are you scared?' I said, 'No.' Then he told me, 'You take care of the family, now,'" he recalled. "(That event) never deterred the way my father conducted business or how he felt about the city of Las Cruces."

Although Johnson died at the age of 49, Kerry said, "I could tell that he felt his life

was complete. He lived his life far beyond his expectations."

Speaking to those who gathered to pay homage to Johnson's work throughout his political career, he said, "Behind all great leaders are communities of God-fearing people with ideas that make this country a great country. I thank you and ask you to honor yourselves for supporting him and making his life full."

Remembering the times during his childhood when he roamed the halls of the former City Hall building in Las Cruces and pretended his was a commissioner himself, sitting in the large seats behind the elected officials' name placards, Johnson's youngest son, Pierre Johnson, spoke of the example his father set for him and his siblings.

"He was a true public servant," he said. "He had a career, and, when he came

home from his day job, he would go to work for the city. That was our example. It made an impression on me. He showed us the importance of staying connected with the city of Las Cruces, how we should conduct ourselves, and to treat others how you want to be treated."

The former mayor's eldest son, Albert Johnson Jr., told those gathered in the City Council Chambers that his experience Saturday watching his father's portrait revealed and hearing the many memories of Johnson that so many in attendance hold dear was one that he would never forget.

"I'm so grateful that this portrait will be here for the rest of our lives and for many, many years to come for the world to see," he said.

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Walgreens

20⁹⁹
30/12 Oz. Cans
Miller Lite,
Coors Light
or Tecate

17⁹⁹
18/12 Oz. Btls.
Corona
Extra or Light or
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Parrot Bay Frozen Pouches 10 oz. \$7.99