

Mayor Mary Parham-Copelan

By Catherine Dean

The possibility of making history was not the motive that spurred Mary Parham-Copelan to join the 2017 Milledgeville mayoral race. According to her, she cared deeply about the community and wanted to make a difference through public service.

“I have witnessed so much struggle in our city—in education, in securing and retaining jobs, in keeping talented students from leaving us—I just wanted to help our community and residents be as successful as possible,” said Parham-Copelan.

Native to Milledgeville, Parham-Copelan credits a Christian upbringing, as well as the support and love of her family, for gifting her the power to believe in herself. The oldest of two children, she was raised by her father, stepmother, and aunts and uncles.

“My parents worked hard and instilled in me a solid work ethic,” she says. “It was my father that showed me how to have a compassionate heart and a strong commitment to helping others.”

Parham-Copelan stresses that her life story is neither unique nor different than most people in town. “As a young single mother, I struggled to provide for my children while bettering myself for a brighter future,” she said. “I always had the hope that I could create a better life through hard work.”

Seeking a profession that would provide for her family, Parham-Copelan became a correctional officer at the Georgia Department of Corrections Women’s Institution. She quickly moved up the ranks, serving as a sergeant, lieutenant, captain, and adjunct instructor in the training department. In addition to being a correctional officer, she worked several part-time jobs to make ends meet for her family.

She reflects upon her time at the women’s prison as an enriching experience that taught her to have empathy for others in difficult situations. “Being a struggling single mother myself, I could relate to the challenges the female inmates faced in their own lives,” she observed. “I witnessed the heartbreak of separation that affected the mothers as well as the children.”

Devotion to family remains one of the most important aspects of life for the mayor. Married for ten years to husband Charlie Copelan, a retired nurse, they have a blended family—two daughters, one son, and four grandchildren. She adds, “We are very proud of our children and grandchildren. Our family is truly a gift from God.”

The mayor is currently employed as a licensed realtor for Century 21 Old Capitol Realty and as a bus operator for the Baldwin County Transportation Department. She also serves as the pastor and CEO of Word of Life Interdenominational Bible Church.

As a religious leader, Parham-Copelan feels a profound responsibility to uplift others. Her ministry contributes to many charitable causes including helping needy families with food and utility bills, as well as providing safe houses and hotel rooms for battered women organizations.

As mayor, she is hyper-focused on creating a city that moves forward positively and progressively. She says, “My desire as mayor is to revive our economic growth and development to make our community stronger for current and future generations of Milledgeville residents.”

One of her greatest passions is education and takes pride in that she, along with her children, are products of the Baldwin County schools. She holds a degree in Theology and is seeking to further her education with a Master of Divinity.

“I believe education is the key to lifting someone out of poverty,” she explained. “I take every opportunity to encourage high school dropouts to return to school or earn their GED.”

As mayor, she believes she has an opportunity to be a role model for young women. Along with other prominent women in the community, she is developing a nonprofit to help the rising generation of women succeed.

“Women Working Together to Help Others Achieve Success (WWOAH) will focus on instilling self-respect and confidence in young women,” she says. “Young ladies need to learn to love themselves and feel self-worth.”

Being new to politics, Parham-Copelan brings a fresh perspective and positive energy to the mayor’s office. She admits her first six months on the job has come with a learning curve but feels she can help the city move forward.

“I am looking forward to holding town hall meetings to listen to our residents’ concerns and desires,” she stresses. “I think there is a great need to listen to your constituents and harness their ideas that will uplift the entire community.”

In addition to holding town hall meetings, the mayor wants to educate the population on voting rights. She would like to teach people that their efforts will count, and everyone has the responsibility to vote their values.

Making history as the first woman elected to the office is just one part of the mayor’s story. She wants to convey her commitment to making Milledgeville the best city possible. “I want everyone to know that with every issue that arises, I will do my homework, see all sides, and will do my best to make the right decision for our residents and our city.”