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-FYI

A good man!

Bill Boyle

Gordon Bush

Who is this new leader of East St. Louis?

By ROB DONALDSON
News-Democrat

East St. Louis Mayor-elect Gordon Bush walks through a Belleville restaurant after an early morning meeting and is recognized by several diners.

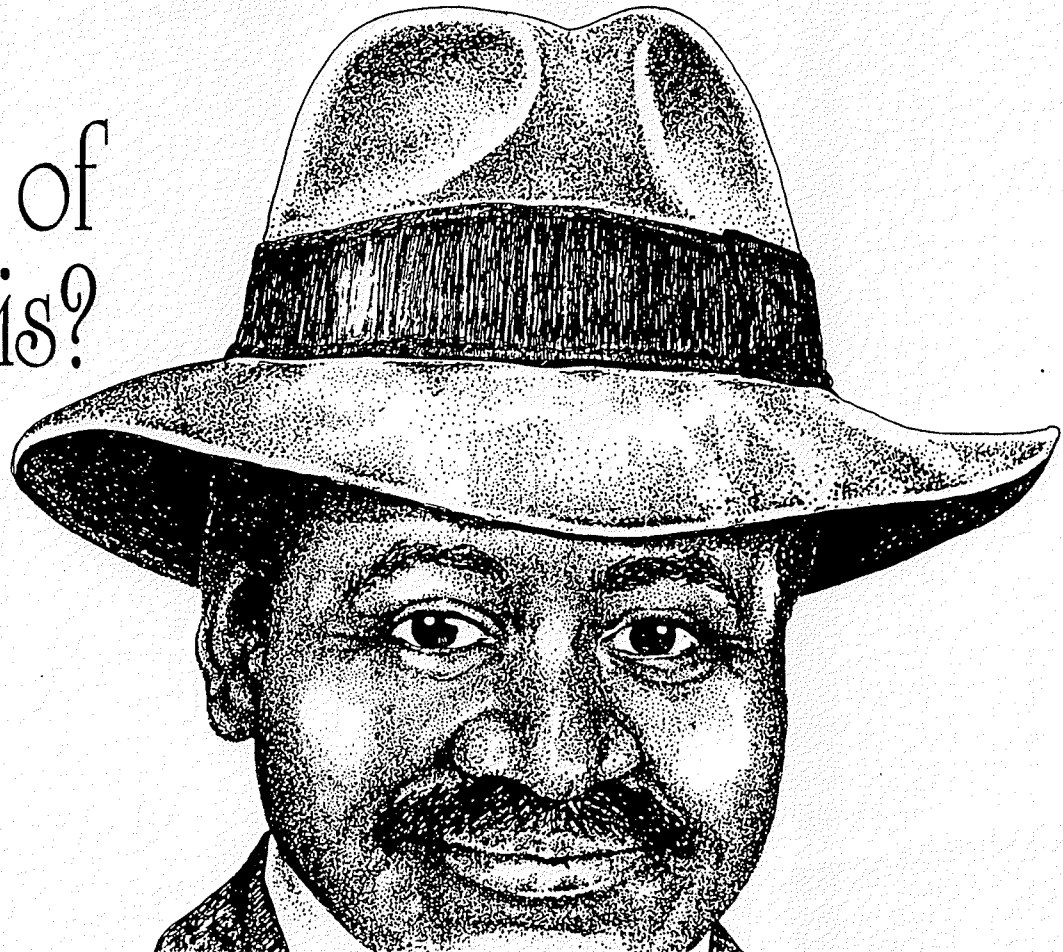
"Hi mayor! Don't work too hard," one shouts.

"You get it together, my friend," another tells him.

Bush — already late for his next meeting in downtown St. Louis — takes time to chat with patrons at four different tables, including Illinois State Police troopers eating breakfast. Clad in his trademark fedora, he shakes the troopers' hands, as he does nearly everyone he meets, smiles and thanks them for patrolling the city's crime-filled streets.

"I just wanted to let you know we appreciate your presence," says Bush, a large, friendly man. He assures the troopers that he will put more city police officers on the street, pay city employees on time and explains he will not need bodyguards — a mainstay of Mayor Carl E. Officer.

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"I try to live a Christian life and I pray to God he will protect me," says the 48-year-old son of a Baptist minister, who mentions his strong faith in God in almost every conversation.

After all, Bush, who will be sworn in Wednesday, may need a miracle to save East St. Louis, which has withered into a national symbol of urban decay.

Named as an All-American city by Look magazine in 1965, East St. Louis today is buried under a \$50 million debt and trash estimated to take 40,000 truckloads to remove.

A skeleton of a city government is all that remains. All but three employees of the city's Public Works Department have been laid off; police patrol cars sometimes run out of gas; and the fire stations are in such disrepair that the automatic garage door on one recently got stuck, trapping the pumpers inside.

City Hall doesn't belong to the city — a local judge gave it away to pay off a \$3.4 million lawsuit won against the city by a man who was beaten in the municipal jail.

Bush knows his job will be tough.

At a recent meeting in St. Louis with leaders of an organization wanting to launch a Christian youth outreach program in the city, he bluntly answers their questions about the city's troubles.

When one of the men asked whether the city was in as bad shape as depicted on "60 Minutes" last year, Bush did not mince words: "It's gotten worse since then. It just goes on and on."

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Bush has no illusion that he will be able to turn the city around by himself.

He's already assembled a transition team of community residents who are reviewing every city department in preparation for a reorganization that's expected to be announced shortly after his inauguration.

His over-booked schedule, which he keeps in an appointment calendar in the black portfolio he carries with him everywhere he goes, is filled with a whirlwind of meetings with business and government leaders on both sides of the river.

He is so busy that his wife, Brenda, said the couple's two children rarely see him these days.

"Our children are wondering when he comes in because they normally are in bed," Brenda Bush said. "They say, 'Oh, he came through tonight?'"

Although some may perceive him to be a workaholic, she said her husband usually balances work and play. But the size of the job that needs to be done in East St. Louis requires him to work extra hard, she said.

"He is a (workaholic) until he gets things the way he wants them," she said.

Since winning the Feb. 26 Democratic primary in a landslide, Bush often works 20-hour days trying to convince others to trust the city government, which has gained a reputation for mispending money given it.

Bush listens intently to every person he talks to, getting down close and cocking his ear toward them so he will hear every word. He believes East St. Louis can no longer be an island and welcomes scrutiny of how the government spends financial aid.

"Whatever resources you give us, we'll use them properly and frugally," Bush said. "We invite you to come in and check up on us."

He wants to restore confidence in city government by hiring "lifelong people of integrity... Christian people and professional."

He emphasizes running city government as a business, hiring qualified professionals for jobs rather than relying on nepotism — a

longstanding practice in the city where the government is one of the last remaining employers.

That's a lesson he said he learned early in serving as a city commissioner and treasurer in the 1970s when he was criticized for hiring his "baby sister," Ardell Bush, to be his secretary.

"I learned from experience, it's not the thing to do," he said.

While Officer portrayed the city as under siege from white racists in the federal, state and county governments, Bush is working to dispel that image.

He has asked companies in the bi-state region to loan executives to help get the city back on its feet until permanent employees can be hired to run the government. So far, he says his message has been well-received.

"Everybody's sympathetic with East St. Louis," he said. "They're realizing it's giving St. Louis a black eye. (Outsiders) think St. Louis and East St. Louis are the same thing."

In fact, Bush said Officer's increasing use of racism was partly the reason he decided to run against the mayor.

"I heard more about racism as a reason why things can't be accomplished in the city," Bush said. "I didn't particularly agree with it. I felt it was sending the wrong signals to our young people."

The mayor's prominence and popularity made him a role model for the city's youth, but he was sending them a message that impeded their integration into American society, Bush said.

"Racism does exist," Bush said. "And I don't know where it's going to end. It's an obstacle you have to learn to deal with and succeed in spite of it. You don't proclaim yourself defeated because of racism. That won't do."

As mayor, Bush said helping the city's youth will be one of his top priorities.

"The mayor has a strong, strong role in the development of our young people in East St. Louis because we don't have fathers in these homes," he said. "They don't have a man that's taught them, talked to them."

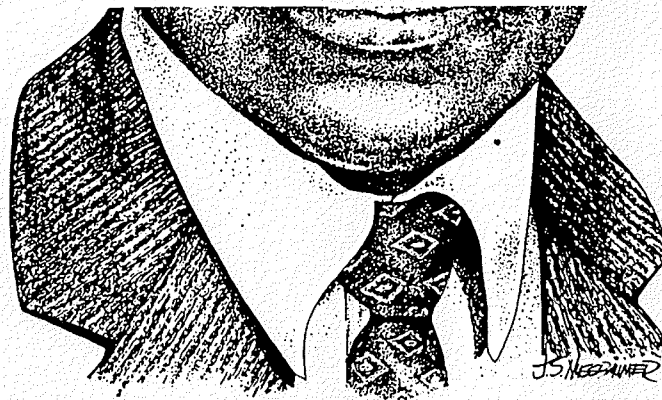
He becomes intense when talking about the youth in his city.

"We had skating rinks, bowling alleys, theaters," he said. "We don't have any of that now. They are either on the streets or at home. There's nothing here for them."

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One of six children, Bush grew up in a modest home at 2629 Missouri Ave., where his parents, 81-year-old Claude and 75-year-old mother, Lillian, still live. The house is about five blocks from where Officer was raised.

Bush's father, a former Golden Gloves



champion who moved to East St. Louis from Mississippi as a teen-ager, still preaches at the Greater New Hope Baptist Church where he is assistant pastor.

To make ends meet, his mother also worked, first in the cafeteria at Hughes-Quinn Junior High School and later as a truant officer for a change of pace.

"We had about everything we needed," Bush recalled. "Not the expensive stuff. We had good clothes. I would say back then we were in the lower, middle income."

Throughout his school years, Bush described himself as quiet and an average student, making the honor roll only a couple of times in junior high. But his academic performance improved when he returned to finish college and began graduate school after returning from the Army in 1969. Bush holds a bachelor's and master's degree in urban planning from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. He also is a major in the U.S. Army Reserves.

His parents were not overly strict with him and his two brothers and three sisters, Bush said. But they kept him close to home.

"As youngsters, we couldn't go in the neighborhood as much as we would have liked to. We just couldn't leave home when we were teen-agers and go up and play basketball. We had to have permission."

"A lot of times, mom said, 'No, I want you to stay here and rake the yard or go over your aunt's house and do some work for her,'" Bush said. "Our parents kept us close around the house doing things."

He and his younger brother, Pearson, now a local attorney, used to sell newspapers every day on the corner of 26th Street and Missouri Avenue before graduating to the family's barbecue stand, which opened in 1955.

"When we were younger, we were around the house and when we got older, we were at the barbecue stand," he said. "It kept us busy so we didn't mind. We were excited about making the fire, cooking the ribs, waiting on the customers."

"It kind of taught us to work and handle money, meet people."

His parents still own the barbecue stand building, which now houses Lucky's barbershop.

As a parent, Bush's wife describes him as an even combination of being strict and supportive. The couple's two children, 11-year-old Gordon Dallan Bush II and 17-year-old Tami Bush, perceive their mother as being more strict because she says "no" more quickly.

"Sometimes I'll say 'no' before I hear the background story," Brenda Bush said. "But in most cases, Gordon will say, 'Okay, if that's what you want to do.' But then he goes around

and asks all these questions.

"It does not seem as though he said no," she said. "He finagles it some kind of way."

Although she grew up in the same neighborhood, Brenda Bush said she did not meet her husband until soon after she graduated from college. She was invited to a party he and his brother were hosting.

His clean-cut image, religious background and friendly personality were among the attributes that attracted her to him.

"He was a gentleman," she said. "He was extremely nice. I felt comfortable with Gordon just having talked with him. He's really a pleasant person and sometimes you just don't meet people like that."

Bush is very conscious about the way he presents himself. He doesn't curse, smoke or drink, his suit and tie are always crisp and his shirts and gold cuff links monogrammed. He drives a 1989 white Cadillac, which he bought used.

His aunt, Vivian Johnson, said Bush can be tough when necessary.

"He gets respect," Johnson said. "You don't have to curse, carry on and stomp your foot and all that. The way you present yourself, that's the way it comes back."

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Bush expects it will take eight years — two terms — for him to accomplish what he admits is an almost overwhelming task of rebuilding the city.

It's a job that he was tempted not to seek two years ago when he was offered a \$60,000-a-year job as a senior auditor at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. He retired from active military duty in December 1989.

The mayor's job pays half that.

"My wife and I made the decision to remain here and not go to D.C. and run for mayor of East St. Louis," he said. "I saw this as a higher calling than taking a job at the Pentagon."

"We could have just left East St. Louis and never looked back."

But if Bush is successful in doing what his predecessors have not — stopping the city's economic slide — it could lead to a bigger political career for himself.

That's a possibility Bush said is too early to consider. But he acknowledged that he would not rule out seeking a higher office if he accomplishes all he can in his hometown.

"That's what I'm about — trying to help our fellow man, black and white, brothers and sisters."

"With God's grace, if I've accomplished that, and if there's another opportunity to serve, I definitely would look into that."

"But there's a lot of work to be done between now and then."