

## ON THE ROAD WITH GOVERNOR WINTER

*Jake McGraw\**

Not long after I began working for the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation in 2013, I received a call from Governor Winter. He'd been invited to give a speech at Delta State University, and he asked if I'd be willing to drive him from Jackson to Cleveland. Traveling with the Governor was not in my job description, but it turned out to be the best perk.

Over the next three years, I drove Governor Winter on dozens of trips around Mississippi and several outside of it. We put thousands of miles on his old Mercury Grand Marquis, a whale of a car that was ideal for cruising across long, straight, empty highways, though less suited for tight curves and parallel parking spaces.

Governor Winter was 90 when we took our first trip together. I was 25. He had been out of office longer than I had been alive, but his presence was still in high demand. He received a variety of invitations: for keynote speeches, panel discussions, book talks, film screenings, and—in the somber duty of someone who outlived most of his contemporaries—eulogies. The largest of these events filled cavernous ballrooms or auditoriums, but he was just as eager to make the trip to speak to a class of honors students at the University of Mississippi or a few dozen travelers on a civil rights tour through Neshoba County. Typically, the only compensation was lunch, which he always accepted enthusiastically.

We settled into a familiar routine. I'd arrive at his house in north Jackson at the appointed time, and the big Mercury sedan would be gassed up and parked in the front drive. I'd start the ignition as he said goodbye to Mrs. Winter and his salt-and-pepper schnauzer Charlie Brown. He always carried a black leather folder that contained the pertinent details for the trip: schedule of events,

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parking information, contact numbers, and so on. It also included printed directions, which he would read aloud as we set out. I usually tracked along on my phone's GPS, just to be sure. Occasionally, he'd bring his iPad, but it usually stayed on the dash while he read the *New York Times* or *Clarion-Ledger* in print. Despite our age difference, we had plenty of common interests, and we easily passed hours on the road talking about politics, Mississippi history, and Ole Miss football.

He rarely came with prepared remarks. Sometimes, he would jot down a few notes on the drive, but seven decades in public life had honed his ability to compose lucid and eloquent speeches off the cuff. Part of his enduring appeal was that he did not speak in the typical genre of ex-politicians. For one thing, he rarely used the retrospective phrases "when I was in office" or "under my administration." He focused almost exclusively on the work that remained unfinished, particularly in the two greatest causes of his life: public education and racial reconciliation. In a sense, he was still campaigning—not for himself, but for future generations of Mississippians.

"That is the kind of responsible citizenship that we must embrace," he implored during the first speech I attended at Delta State. "In doing the things that may not immediately and directly benefit us but will create for those who come after us the opportunities for a more fulfilling and productive life."<sup>1</sup>

His speeches often contained several keystone refrains that I came to know by heart. My favorite went something like this: "I've found that almost everyone, regardless of what they look like or where they come from, agrees on the same basic propositions. Everyone wants a fair chance at a job that will sustain themselves and their family. Everyone wants a quality education for their children. Everyone wants to live in a decent house on a safe street. Everyone wants access to adequate, affordable healthcare. And, most of all, everyone wants to be treated with dignity and respect."

Most of society's divisions, he believed, could be resolved if we devoted our collective attention to those propositions upon which everyone already agreed. It was a formula he had followed

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<sup>1</sup> Delta State Univ., *Distinguished Speakers Lecture Series: William Winter*, YOUTUBE (Oct. 28, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00BYlReyrrM> [Perma.cc link unavailable].

throughout his long political career. He provided a voice of reason during an era of demagoguery, and he used the power of the many offices he held to improve living standards and educational opportunities for white and black Mississippians alike. For these contributions, he was rightly revered. But what made Governor Winter beloved was how graciously he treated everyone he encountered. To him, dignity and respect were not accolades to be earned, but gifts to be given freely.

It was common for people to thank him for some small act of kindness he had performed decades prior. They included such gestures as his hospitality during a class trip to the Governor's Mansion or a condolence note he had written on the passing of a relative. One day, we were having lunch in Oxford when a burly man in his 60s approached the table. He introduced himself as a Vietnam veteran who had felt ostracized when he returned home from the war. "Mr. Winter," he said, "you were the only one who shook my hand and thanked me for my service."

He never missed an opportunity to meet someone new. He said hello to everyone who happened to get on the elevator with him, and he glad-handed people on the street long after he stopped seeking their votes. Once, while we were in Grenada with two others, we stopped to look at a historical marker in a part of town that didn't get many visitors. The green sign was perched on a hillside above a road with a few houses nearby. A man walking down the street looked warily at our congregation. I still wonder what he thought as an old man half-slid down the hill to approach him, extend a hand, and say cheerfully, "Hi, I'm William Winter."

During formal events, I was content to blend into the wallpaper until he was ready to leave. He never let that happen. He made it clear to me—and to everyone else—that I was there as his companion, not his chauffeur. He introduced me to each of the hosts and VIPs who greeted him, and he brought me along to every private meeting and meal. If only one chair had been reserved at his table, he'd insist on finding another for me. He included me in the conversations too, often asking for my opinion on some topic in front of the university presidents, foundation executives, or politicians with whom he was seated. During a couple of audience Q&A sessions, he even called me in front of the crowd to give my thoughts.

When the time came to get back in the car to drive home, he'd pull the ancient flip phone from his pocket to call his wife. "Helloooo!" he'd say in a singsong voice when Mrs. Winter answered. He'd ask how she and Charlie Brown were doing, then let her know what time to expect him home. Sometimes, we were on the road late at night, but he never slept. An orange Gatorade was all he needed to keep going. If a baseball or football game was on the radio, we'd listen, but usually, we would pick up the conversation where we'd left off and continue it all the way to Jackson. As we'd pull back into his circular driveway, he'd mention an upcoming trip and ask if I'd be willing to join, never presuming. I'd tell him I'd check my schedule, knowing that I would move whatever needed to be moved in order to be available.

Our days on the road came to an end in early 2017, when a slip on an icy driveway slowed him down long enough for age to finally catch up. Still, whenever I would visit him afterwards, he would take my arm as I rose to leave and say, "Jake, let's find another trip to take soon." What I wouldn't give for one more.