

D.C. church recalls real butler as quiet man of steady faith

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August 14, 2013

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Eugene Allen served eight presidents as a White House butler, and his legendary career is the inspiration for “Lee Daniels’ The Butler,” a film starring Oprah Winfrey, Jane Fonda and a host of A-list Hollywood talent.

But members of The Greater First Baptist Church knew the man who died in 2010 by other titles: usher, trustee, and a humble man of quiet faith.

“The attributes that made him a great butler made him a great usher,” said Denise Johnson, an usher at the predominantly black D.C. church where Allen was a member for six decades.

Those qualities were both external — black suits and white gloves — and internal — a dignified, soft-spoken manner.

On a recent Sunday, parishioners recalled Allen as a peacemaker, someone who never raised his voice.

His devotion to service extended far beyond the public and private rooms of the White House to the doorways and kitchen of his church. In African-American churches, the usher is a special role bestowed on highly regarded members. Allen joined others to open doors to visitors and pass out fans and offering plates. He also would roll up his sleeves and help prepare fish and chicken at church fundraising dinners.

“He was not only a servant there,” the Rev. Robert Hood, an associate minister, said of Allen’s White House work. “But he was also a servant doing the work of the Lord.”

The movie hits theaters on Friday (Aug. 16) with Allen portrayed as the fictional Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker), married to Gloria (Winfrey). The movie spans his personal journey from segregation to integration, during which he tended to keep his mouth shut about the goings-on inside the White House as well as the civil rights struggles roiling the nation.

Church members recalled that Allen, like the fictional Cecil Gaines, was fairly reticent.

“He loved that job, was committed to it,” said fellow trustee Dolores Causer of his White House job serving eight presidents. “But he never really would discuss anything other than to say he loved his work and he enjoyed each and every one of them.”

The writer of the four-page obituary in Allen’s funeral program, however, gained some insights into his thoughts about working with U.S. presidents:

- * Harry S. Truman was “hands down, the best dressed President.”
- * He considered Dwight Eisenhower’s decision to send troops to enforce school desegregation in Little Rock, Ark., “an especially admirable act.”
- * He said Lyndon Johnson’s action on civil rights “would be the jewel in his crown.”
- * “He was much grieved by (Richard) Nixon’s demise and ultimate resignation.”
- * He “failed to see the pratfall ... humor in the Saturday Night Live impersonations of (Gerald) Ford, calling him the best athlete in the White House in his time.”
- * “In the last year of his life, Eugene admitted that another young couple (the Obamas) had indeed entered the White House who possessed the Kennedy magic.”

Allen acknowledged that he was especially fond of the Reagans, who invited him — in real life and in the movie — to a state dinner before he retired in 1986. “He often talked about how nice they were to him,” recalled church member Marion Washington, who knew Allen when he was promoted to maitre d’.

In the movie, Cecil and Gloria Gaines are portrayed as a Christian couple, with a crucifix over their bed and a devotion to the Bible.

Director Lee Daniels, a Philadelphia native who grew up in the oldest black Episcopal church in the country, said it was important for the movie to include religious elements. He fought to include a scene depicting a church fundraiser for the Freedom Riders in which a choir sings “Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Stayed

On Freedom.”

“You can’t tell a story about the civil rights movement without the gospel and gospel music,” he said. “You just simply can’t. It’s impossible.”

Wil Haygood, who wrote the 2008 Washington Post story that first brought Allen’s story to light, said it was more than chance that allowed him to bring public attention to Allen’s otherwise private career.

“There was a higher force that led me to Mr. Allen’s front door,” said Haygood, who made dozens of calls before tracking down Allen. “He had a landline. If he would have had a cell phone I would have never found him.”

Now, he said, after Allen worked quietly behind the scenes while presidents from Truman to Reagan were in the limelight, the roles are reversed.

“To me, in a way, it’s almost biblical: The last shall be first,” said Haygood. “He’s not working in the White House theater, serving popcorn. He’s the star on the big screen.”