

Influencers make history in Tampa, Hillsborough County

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(L-R) Les Miller Jr., Tamara Shamburger, and Frank Reddick at Café con Tampa.

Hillsborough County ushered in a historic leadership moment last November that largely has gone unnoticed but is a major point of pride for those involved and for many observers.

Tamara Shamburger was elected by her peers to chair the Hillsborough County School Board. And Les Miller, Jr. was chosen by his peers to chair the

Hillsborough County Commission. They thus joined Tampa City Council Chairman Frank Reddick who took over the duties of Council leadership in 2015. For the first time in Hillsborough County's history, all three governmental bodies that serve the county and the city are led by blacks. "It's so amazing to be a part of this important history for our city," Shamburger says. "I got chills when the reality sunk in." She had called to congratulate Miller and came away with a history lesson.

The news has received little fanfare. The *Florida Sentinel-Bulletin* wrote the first story. The trio spoke about the accomplishment at a recent Café con Tampa breakfast and afterward, a Channel 10 reporter interviewed them. "We were disappointed," says Reddick, about the lack of attention. But he recalled how gratifying it was to be selected City Council chairman in 2015, and now to see history made with Shamburger and Miller. It shows that you "have the trust and respect of your colleagues," Reddick says. "You can govern this body and be a leader."

Leading by example

Reddick says he hopes the next generation of potential future leaders takes note and feels inspired. "I think it sets a goal for younger people who have an interest in getting into politics," says Reddick. Miller, a former Florida State Senate Minority Leader and longtime community leader in Tampa, agrees. "I am honored to be part of history and I hope that this will happen again," he says. "I hope young black people see this and understand the significance of running for office. It's one of the most rewarding things you can do. You are doing things to help people in your community."

To underscore the importance of having three blacks in leadership roles, Miller recalls that for years governing bodies never had more than one black serving at a time. And, only one black -- civil rights leader Leon Lowry -- ever won a countywide race, Miller says. Lowry was the first black to serve on the school board. Miller's wife, Gwen Miller, was the first black woman elected to City Council and, also the first to serve as that body's chairwoman. Blacks struggled to get there. "It took blood, sweat, tears, heartaches, and actual crying," says Miller. Miller grew up in Tampa during Jim Crow days when blacks rode at the back of the bus, drank from colored-only water fountains, and waited for food service, if it was available, at a restaurant's back window.

Miller attended black-only schools before desegregation. He received a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of South Florida; and, an honorary degree in humane letters from Florida A & M University. Miller has served as vice president and dean of students at USF. His public service includes stints in the Florida House and Senate. He was elected to the county commission in 2010, and served his first term as chairman in 2013, overlapping for a time with Reddick. They made history even then. It was the first-time two blacks had led city and county governing bodies.

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Reddick is a generation behind Miller. He grew up in Tampa with his mother and sister and was among the first blacks to desegregate Hillsborough's schools. He attended Blake High School but when boundary lines were redrawn, Reddick says, "They shipped us out to Plant [High School]." He is a Paine College graduate; president and chief executive officer for the Sickle Cell Association of Hillsborough County; and, the chief operations officer for the Sickle Cell Association of Florida. He was interim city councilman before winning his first full term in 2011, and the chairmanship four years later. Now history again is being made.

Making leadership count

The school board chairwoman wants to make this moment count. "I would hope we could try to leverage this opportunity to move our agendas forward to focus on diversity," she says. "I would like something worthwhile to be done if it's just to show the younger generation they can keep going forward."



Shamburger grew up in a military household, often moving to new places. But Tampa and Hillsborough County have always been home base. In the seventh grade, her family returned to Hillsborough after a few years away. Shamburger graduated from Bloomingdale High School, in Brandon. She has a liberal arts degree from Hillsborough Community College, a degree in political science from USF, and a master's degree in business administration from St. Leo University. Shamburger is a businesswoman in the insurance industry. She was elected to the school board in 2006 from the county's District 5. Advocating for diversity is a passion, she says. "It's all about equity, making sure there is equal access for all students," Shamburger says. But she says, "I think there is still a lot of room for improvement. This country is in a difficult place. We have a long way to go in race relations. We've taken a step back even."

Reddick wants to see more progress. But he worries that in coming years there could be fewer blacks elected to city council. The explosive growth in downtown Tampa is changing the demographics of District 5, which now is predominately black. It is trending less so into the future. The master-planned development of **Encore** at the edge of downtown displaced some residents; newer and sometimes less diverse populations are moving into apartments and condominiums downtown and in Channel District. For Reddick, there is hope amid frustration. "I think once Trump was elected president [that] it motivated people to run for office," he says. "I have seen people running that I would never have thought would run."

Miller believes similar growth and population trends could affect his county district, and possibly Shamburger's school board district. "As these things continue to happen in four, eight or 12 years, you could well have no African-American sitting on elected boards," he says.

Miller is thinking of retirement when he is term-limited in 2020, though some are encouraging him to run countywide for a commission seat. Reddick recently announced plans to run for Miller's seat.

He, Miller, and Shamburger are putting their faith in the younger generation to pursue public service and make their own history. "I think it's a very important time," Shamburger says. "It shows the strength of the black community and passion in the black community to be leaders."