

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Lelia K. Foley-Davis



(November 7, 1942 -)

"First African-American Woman Mayor in the U.S."

Lelia K. Foley-Davis was born Lelia Kasensia Smith in Taft, Oklahoma on November 7, 1942. Her father was a sharecropper and her mother was a midwife. They lived in a three-room shotgun shack. The youngest of 10 children, Lelia graduated from Moton High School in 1960 and by 1973, she was an unemployed, divorced mother of five, relying on unemployment to pay the bills, having just been laid off from her job as a teacher's aide due to budget cuts.



Wanting to make a difference in the struggling school system, Lelia decided to run for a seat on the school board. Unsuccessful and undeterred, she set her sights higher and ran for the office of Mayor of Taft. With \$200 of campaign donations from friends, she began campaigning door to door, introducing herself in churches and throughout the city. Taft was a small town of less than 500 black residents and many thought this "30 year old, unemployed, unmarried, mother of five, surviving off of public assistance," wasn't qualified for the job. But, the majority did, and on April 3, 1973, Lelia won with 93 votes, beating the incumbent. And with that win, Lelia Foley-Davis became the first African-American women Mayor in the United States.



With the Mayor's salary a mere \$200 a year, Lelia continued drawing unemployment until she began working as a law librarian at the courthouse. In 1974, Oklahoma named Lelia "Outstanding Woman of the Year" and President Gerald Ford invited her to the White House. She told President Ford she was there to talk about housing for her community and within three months, she had coordinated with the administration on a plan for more housing. The community of Taft ultimately received 24 rural rental houses to help its lower income residents, including young mothers on welfare, obtain affordable housing. She considered it one of her most significant achievements. When then Senator Ted Kennedy offered her a position with his office in Washington, she declined, citing her work and love for the City of Taft.



With success came disappointments and the closing of the city's only schools was perhaps her biggest defeat. Although she fought to keep the schools open, the population had dwindled to about 200 people and the schools closed for good in 1989. Local children were bussed to nearby Muskogee and Haskell. Another defeat came when the state decided to convert two facilities that served Taft special needs children - one for those with mentally disabilities, the other for the "deaf, blind and orphaned" children - into minimum-security prisons for men and women.

Lelia lost her position as mayor in 1989 but was reelected in 2000. After an unsuccessful bid for the House or Representatives that same year, Lelia Foley-Davis retired from politics but continued to advocate for the citizens of Taft.

At the age of 77, her current project is creating a memorial in the small field that sat adjacent to the former institution for special needs children - where many of the orphaned children who died there are buried in unmarked graves.

She hopes to one day be included in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture as a trailblazer for Black Women Mayors.

