

Overcoming poverty's odds

Maine's first black senator began life poor, fatherless

The Associated Press

LEWISTON — Growing up poor and fatherless on the mean streets of Newark, N.J., John Jenkins could easily have wound up in a gang, in jail — or dead.

Instead, he became Maine's first black state senator. How Jenkins beat the odds to also attend an exclusive college, become a martial arts expert and serve two terms as mayor of the state's second-largest city amazes even him sometimes.

"I ran with gangs for a while," the 44-year-old Jenkins said. "I'm not proud of some of the things that we as youngsters got involved in, thinking that sometimes might makes right. Unfortunately, some of my friends kept doing it, and most of them are not alive today."

That it took Maine 176 years to elect a black to the Senate this fall might not be too surprising, considering the state is less than 1 percent African-American. Maine elected its first black to the House of Representatives in the 1970s.

Still, Jenkins' election shouldn't be overlooked, some say.

"Certainly, these are small mile posts along the way to changing times, and they show you how society changes, even in a state like Maine, which is slow



Lewiston Mayor John Jenkins was elected to the Maine Senate in November. (AP Photo)

to change and is still overwhelmingly rural and predominately white," said former Rep. Herbert Adams of Portland, an amateur historian of the Legislature.

Jenkins, a Democrat, has called Lewiston home since 1970, when he won a scholarship to Bates College. The liberal arts school's ivy-covered campus was a radical departure from the tough Newark ghetto where Jenkins' mother enrolled him in karate and Scouting at an early age to keep him off the streets.

Jenkins said his parents got divorced when he was about 8, but not until after his mother had to be hos-

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Maine senator elected to overcome odds

Jenkins, from A1

pitalized from the beatings her husband gave her. Jenkins recalls his mother struggling to feed, house and clothe her three children by working in a steaming-hot laundry for 23 years.

One summer, Jenkins offered to help so he could earn some "book money."

"I was an athlete. I thought I was invincible," Jenkins said. "I lasted two weeks."

Thanks to the discipline learned from countless martial arts lessons on a cold, cement floor, as well as the positive influences of his mother and numerous others, Jenkins said, he managed to escape the worst Newark had to offer.

He starred in football and track at high school, where he also became class president. A former teacher remembers Jenkins as having a strong desire "to achieve, to be better."

"He was just a bright, bubbly, young individual and he always struck me that someday he was going to be somebody," said

Newark Mayor Sharpe James, who taught Jenkins at the former South Side High School. "He would listen, he would follow instructions. He always had this energy about him."

At Bates, which had few black students, Jenkins had to make some big adjustments. Arriving on campus with years of pent-up racial anger inside him, it took Jenkins a while to realize "suffering was not a black thing. Love was a universal thing."

Working part time, Jenkins taught karate and played in a small jazz band with some friends. In 1974, he graduated with a psychology degree and soon took a trip to the Far East to perfect his self-defense skills and compete on an international level.

Back in Lewiston, the charismatic Jenkins developed a talent for motivational speaking by giving pep talks to schools and businesses statewide. He opened a karate studio and invested in real estate.

A conversation with the intense, strongly built Jenkins can be an

uplifting experience. He peppers his rapid speech with slogans like "Learn to see beyond your circumstances" and "There's no 'I' in the word 'team,' which stands for Together Each Action Matters and Together Everyone Achieves More."

Twenty years of lectures like that before classes in Lewiston and around Maine have been a major factor behind Jenkins' success, said Douglas Hodgkin, a Bates political science professor.

"He's well known as far as having that exposure to all these kids, and the word gets back to the parents," Hodgkin said. "Many of those kids are now voters."

Jenkins became Lewiston's first black mayor in 1993. He says he ran for re-election after "the people" asked him, winning the largely ceremonial post handily last year. He won the Senate race against an ultraconservative Republican by a 2-to-1 margin.

Among his accomplishments as mayor, Jenkins says, is an initiative to attract more international

business by capitalizing on Lewiston's French heritage; a partnership with neighboring Auburn to cut expenses and improve services; and involving young people in government by putting students on the City Council and other boards.

However, Jenkins has had run-ins with controversy. His critics accuse him of letting several of his properties become dilapidated while falling \$17,000 behind in city taxes and defaulting on thousands more in loans while mayor.

"He trashed over half a million dollars of property we had to have torn down," said Glenn Nutting, owner of Maine Motel and Cabins in Lewiston. "Every time you turned around, there was something you found out about this guy that just didn't add up."

Jenkins, who has never been married, admits he has made some bad investments. But he insists "everything has been resolved, all my debts to the city and the bank have been paid off."

In fact, Jenkins said the experience proves he's a leader.

UNUM hires Jenkins

BY LIZ CHAPMAN
Staff Writer

LEWISTON — Mayor John Jenkins has been hired by one of the nation's premier insurance companies to help recruit new minority business and develop new markets.



JENKINS

The motivational speaker turned mayor turned state senator said Wednesday he's thrilled to be working for UNUM America and thinks his leadership and interpersonal skills will be a nice fit with the Portland-based insurance giant.

Jenkins said he has no intention of forsaking the city, though. He intends to seek re-election to the Maine Senate next year, he said. He remains mayor until a special runoff election Dec. 9 between former City Councilor Norm Poulin and political newcomer Kaileigh Tara.

"I'll be doing the work I do so well," he said, "which is the people

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business, if you will. I'm honored to work for such a quality company that's known as a leader in the industry and for treating its employees well."

Jenkins has been named the company's first director for multicultural marketing development. He will work to recruit customers for UNUM, particularly black-owned and women-owned businesses. He also will work "to position the company's products in the market so they continue to do well," he said.

The Beacon Street resident said he will continue to operate his motivational speaking business, which helped catapult him to a successful political career in the state's second largest city.

"The people want my message; they want my program," he said. "That's (part of) the reason UNUM hired me."

Jenkins said he will continue to vote on insurance-related bills in the Legislature, as long as they are not specifically aimed at UNUM, one of the nation's leading underwriters of disability insurance, among other business insurance lines.

He doesn't believe the job poses a conflict with his public service and, in fact, thinks not voting on insurance matters would be shirking his responsibilities to Lewiston people.

"Citizens voted for me to go up there (to Augusta) and speak their voice, and why wouldn't I speak their voice on an insurance bill that could benefit the people of Lewiston?" Jenkins asked.

Jenkins said he would not lobby for UNUM in his role as state senator, saying both he and his new employer have too much integrity to play politics. "I have never done that and I never will," he said.

Douglas Hodgkin, a political science professor at Jenkins' alma mater, Bates College, said the senator won't be faced with a legal conflict of interest over voting on insurance bills, but the public's percep-

tion may be another matter.

Hodgkin said all Maine legislators who work have conflicts of interest — teachers on education bills, lawyers on tort reform, business owners on business taxes, and on and on.

That's a drawback of a "citizen legislature," rather than full-time, full-salaried lawmakers, Hodgkin said. And while Maine law makes it difficult to pin a legal conflict on a legislator, voters could see it differently.

"Certainly there's a conflict in the perceptions that people will have," Hodgkin said.

Jenkins, a Democrat, said he will miss serving as Lewiston mayor, but has hopes for his political future, which is still uncertain. "I just see John Jenkins trying to be a dedicated, humble public servant for the citizens of Lewiston and there are many ways to do that," he said.

The New Jersey native has called Lewiston his home for the past 27 years.

He isn't willing to limit his political options. He might be interested in running for Congress next year or governor in four years, he said, passing up the chance to run against popular Gov. Angus King next year.

"A number of people have approached me about (running for) higher office," Jenkins said. "I'm very honored that people keep tossing my name out ... especially (for) the Blaine House," he said. "...But

(King) has done a good job and he's a good friend, so I don't think it's the right time" to run for governor.

Jenkins has endorsed Kaileigh Tara for mayor, saying she has the vision, honesty and work ethic to move the city into the next century.

"Integrity, honesty and compassion for others; that's what I want to see in my mayor," he said.

Jenkins scoffed at lingering rumors that he doesn't live in Lewiston, calling them "foolishness," and discounted the possibility that he will become a stranger to Lewiston as his job pulls him to Portland and beyond. "I've lived in Lewiston for 27 years and I have no intention of going anywhere," he said.

Jenkins began the UNUM job last week. He has worked for the company for four years as a consultant, presenting motivational seminars on leadership, team building and market development.

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Records reflect Jenkins' concern about full-time service

BY LIZ CHAPMAN
Staff Writer

LEWISTON — State Sen. John Jenkins officially announced Wednesday he will not seek election to a second term, citing the demands of holding down a full-time job while serving in the Legislature.

Jenkins, a two-term Lewiston mayor who parlayed his popularity to a Senate seat in 1996, did not re-

turn phone calls Wednesday.

"It is very difficult to balance the responsibilities of being a legislator and the personal concerns that come with the choice to be a full-time public servant," Jenkins said in a prepared statement. "My decision not to seek



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a second term is purely personal. I am honored to have had this opportunity to serve our great community."

Jenkins' attendance record on two legislative committees and his roll call voting record in the Senate reflect the concerns expressed in his statement.

In 1997, the first year of the current two-year session, Jenkins attended 40 of 56 meetings of the Business

and Economic Development Committee, and just seven of 84 meetings of the Transportation Committee, according to committee clerk records.

Through last week, he had attended two of 11 business committee sessions in 1998 and none of the five meetings of the transportation panel, records show.

In 300 recorded votes this session in the Senate, known as roll calls,

Jenkins missed 39 votes, according to records of the secretary of the Senate. By comparison, Auburn Sen. John Cleveland was absent for 29 votes while Oxford County Sen. Richard Bennett didn't miss any votes.

Jenkins did not attend public hearings Wednesday for either of the two committees, including a Transporta-

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tion Committee hearing on a sweeping proposal by Secretary of State Dan Gwadosky to toughen up the laws governing teen drivers.

Jenkins said it's time for him to tackle new challenges, chiefly his new job with UNUM America in Portland, one of the country's premier business insurance companies. He was hired last November as the firm's first director of multicultural marketing development to attract more black- and women-owned business into the UNUM fold.

Jenkins' announcement this week represents an about-face from

his intentions when he accepted the UNUM job last fall. At that time Jenkins said he would seek re-election to the Senate and was even warding off overtures from supporters to run against Gov. Angus King this year.

He remained noncommittal about his future political aspirations. "I just see John Jenkins trying to be a humble public servant for the city of Lewiston and there are many ways to do that."

In addition to working for UNUM, Jenkins maintains his private business, Pep Talk, in Lewiston, where he has lived for 27 years.

Where is Senator Jenkins?

Since he's taken a job with UNUM, Augusta doesn't see much of John Jenkins.

He wasn't in Thursday. On Friday he wasn't with his Business and Economic Development Committee while it toured the University of Maine.

In fact, it seems Sen. John Jenkins is rarely in Augusta, especially since he announced he was not seeking re-election due to his new job with UNUM. It's like Jenkins has become a ghost. He's attended two of 13 Business and Economic Development Committee meetings, and one out of 16 Transportation Committee meetings. Jenkins has, however, made most of the votes taken in the Senate.

Senate President Mark Lawrence said he and Jenkins have talked about Jenkins' job situation, and they've worked out a deal. Jenkins has agreed to show up on days where "important votes" are taking place. "He's made that commitment to me," Lawrence said. "If there is an important vote, he leaves his number." The agreement is working out, Lawrence said. "He's been here for most of the votes. ... He was, he is, a fine senator. He found out the Legislature is very restrictive to the types of people who can serve."

On Thursday Jenkins was absent when the Senate voted to confirm Lewiston Police Chief Michael Kelly as commissioner of the Department of Public Safety.

Most bosses would agree that to do any job well, you have to show up.

Meanwhile Jenkins continues to get his legislative pay of \$7,500 for the three-month session, or about \$130 a day.

Dome CONTINUED FROM

Members who miss days cannot get paid for expenses, but they are not docked for their base pay.

Lawrence's slip of "he was a fine senator" may be right on the nose. Jenkins has been a good public servant.

But now it feels like Lewiston is getting taxation without representation.

Jenkins confirms he will run for governor

● The former Lewiston mayor says he will run as an independent and seek public campaign financing.

By PAUL CARRIER

Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — After hinting for months that he may run for governor, former Lewiston mayor and onetime state senator John Jenkins

confirmed Wednesday that he will enter the race.

"We're going to do it," Jenkins told the Press Herald when asked about his plans. He said he will formally announce "within the next couple of weeks" that he will run as a publicly financed independent candidate.

Jenkins is the only African-American in the race and, if elected, would become the first African-American governor in the state's 181-year history.

Coincidentally, Jenkins confirmed

that he will run only three days after another candidate, Republican Daniel Wathen, dropped out. With Jenkins in the race, there are now two Republicans, two independents and one Democrat vying for the Blaine House. They may be joined by two candidates affiliated with the Green Independent Party - Jonathan Carter and Steven Farsaci.

"I'm an independent, clean-election candidate," Jenkins said, referring to the state Clean Election Act, which will provide public

financing for gubernatorial candidates for the first time in this campaign. "If it wasn't for the Clean Election Act, I wouldn't even be able to consider it," he said of his run.

Jenkins said his campaign will focus on the economy, education and the environment. He offered few specifics, but said he will focus on making Maine attractive to small businesses, and that he probably will oppose creation of a national park in

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John Jenkins is attempting to become Maine's first African-American governor.

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northern Maine because he wants to keep "Maine lands in Maine hands."

He said his membership on the executive board of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, an accreditation group, has helped him to understand the state's educational needs.

Jenkins and Republican James Libby are the only announced candidates who plan to rely on public campaign funding, although Carter and Farsaci have both said they want to use public financing if they run. The privately funded candidates are Democrat John Baldacci, who represents the 2nd District in the U.S. House, Republican Peter Cianchette and independent David Flanagan.

A New Jersey native and Bates College graduate, the 49-year-old Jenkins is a self-employed businessman and martial-arts expert who works as a consultant, motivational speaker and organizer of wellness programs. He served as mayor of Lewiston from 1993 to 1997 and was elected to the state Senate in 1996, serving one term there. In both cases, he was the first African-American to hold those posts.

Jenkins said he would like to believe that race will play no role in the campaign, but "we live in America and for some it will be an issue." He said he hopes voters will "look at my character and my deeds and what I want to do, not the color of my skin."

How Jenkins' entry will affect the governor's race remains to be seen, but one veteran observer with Lewiston ties suggested that Jenkins may pull votes from Baldacci.

Douglas Hodgkin of Lewiston, a political scientist at Bates College, noted that Jenkins has Androscoggin County roots and that Lewiston and Auburn are Democratic strongholds, so Baldacci may take a hit in those cities.

Jenkins probably is hoping for a repeat of the 1974 governor's race, when independent Jim Longley of Lewiston scored an upset win over Democrat George Mitchell and Republican Jim Erwin, in part by successfully appealing to urban Franco-Americans.

Jenkins clearly hopes to lure Franco-American Democrats away from Baldacci, noting that he was a co-founder of the Lewiston chapter of an international organization that promotes trade among French-speaking people, regions and countries worldwide.

Still, Jenkins probably faces an

uphill fight. Observers believe he will find it difficult to pry most Democrats and Republicans away from their respective candidates. In addition, he will split the independent vote with Flanagan. By relying on public financing, though, he should have enough money to wage a credible campaign.

If Jenkins qualifies for public funds by April 15, he would get \$41,885 from the state before the June primary, even though he won't be on the ballot until November. He would then get another \$286,910 during the general-election campaign, plus up to \$573,820 more in general-election matching funds if he is outspent by privately funded opponents. All told, he could get more than \$900,000 from the state fund.

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Jenkins joins Youth Center staff

By AMY CALDER
Staff Writer

WATERVILLE — Former Lewiston Mayor John Jenkins, a five-time world martial arts champion, is the new development director for the Alfond Youth Center.

Jenkins, 51, of Lewiston, said he plans to move to Waterville soon.

"I love Waterville," Jenkins said Monday in his new office at the Alfond Center. "When this

opportunity came along I said, 'Wow.' I got goose bumps. I know this area very well and I have a lot of friends up here."

As development director, Jen-



JENKINS

kins will work to forge partnerships with schools and businesses in the area and raise funds to develop programs designed to help improve the quality of life for children and their families.

For the last five years, Jenkins has been both a personal and professional consultant to businesses and organizations all over the country, teaching leadership, team-building, sales, and sales staff development.

A native of Newark, N.J., he came to Maine 33 years ago and received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Bates College. Later, he attended Columbia and Harvard universities.

He served as mayor of Lewiston from 1993-98 and was a Democratic state senator in 1997-98. A martial arts teacher, he is a member of the World Martial Arts Hall of Fame, Maine State Sports Hall of Fame, Lewiston/Auburn Hall of Fame and taught critical skills at

the Maine Criminal Justice Academy for 26 years. He has given the keynote address at the Martin Luther King Breakfast held at the Muskie Center.

"The honorable John Jenkins brings a variety of skills and world experiences to this post," Kenneth Walsh, executive director of the Alfond Center, said. "Mr. Jenkins comes to our community with over 33 years of success in teaching wellness, safety and personal development. He has lectured and trained throughout the U.S., Japan and the People's Republic of China."

While mayor of Lewiston, the city was one of five in the U.S. to receive the City Livability Award, which recognized cities for strong focus on issues including youth services and wellness.

"I've been very fortunate to have developed a very strong rapport with literally hundreds of thousands of kids," Jenkins said.

As mayor, he developed a pro-

gram whereby youths became non-voting members of committees in the city, such as the City Council, school board and land use committee. He often is asked to speak at high school graduations, and is a member of the executive board for the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, an accrediting organization.

Straight-talking and energetic, Jenkins is a strong advocate for children.

"You have to pay more attention to children than handling dynamite because you really are playing a role in shaping this person's character," he said. "You may or may not be a deciding factor in the path this kid will take." He praised the Alfond Center.

"The staff is par excellence," he said. "It's a world-class facility."

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'It's good to be needed'

ELECTION

07

More inside

RACINO: With Tuesday's defeat of the racino proposal, it's back to the drawing board for Washington County. **Page A3**

TIMELY: This year's experiment with early voting in three Maine communities was declared a success. **Page A3**

LEGISLATURE: Democrats gained seats in the Maine House on Tuesday. **Page A3**

Jenkins reflects on historic win

BY LINDSAY TICE
Staff Writer

AUBURN — A day after a surprise tide of write-in votes swept him back into the mayor's office, John Jenkins still had trouble believing he'd made political history — again.

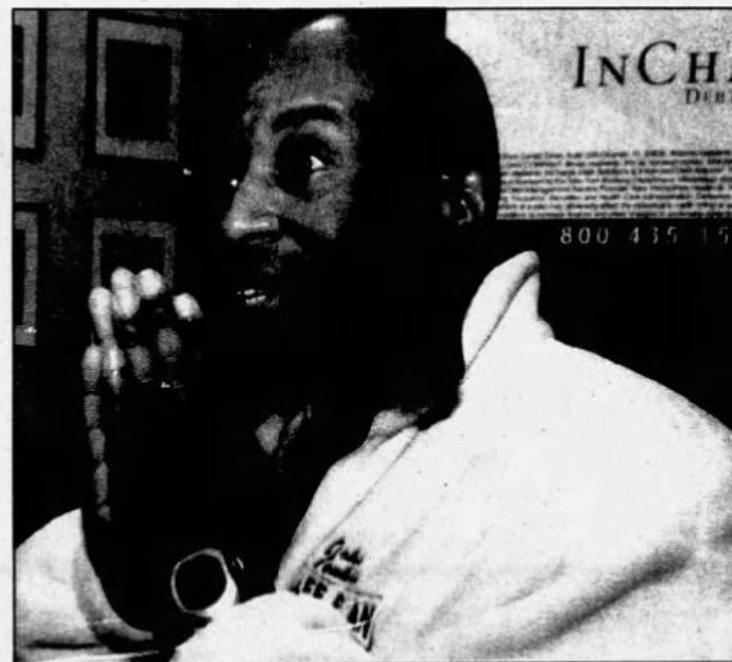
"I'm just humbled by the magnitude of what this means," he said Wednesday. "I'm just in awe of what the citizens have done. I'm just humbled."

Jenkins spent the day after Election Day attending a conference on regional partner-

ships in Lewiston. Or at least he attempted to attend. Aside from the friends, citizens and conference participants who offered constant congratulations, at least nine TV news stations — some from as far away as Boston and New York — vied for Jenkins' attention, clamoring for an interview with the first Auburn mayor, and perhaps the first Maine mayor, to be elected by write-in votes.

"I kept reiterating the fact this moment belongs to the citi-

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JOSÉ LEIVA/SUN JOURNAL

Auburn Mayor John Jenkins celebrates his write-in victory Tuesday night at Gipper's in Auburn.

Jenkins

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zens, because I was truly the citizens' hand-chosen candidate," he said. "And when you have the people speak with that loud of a voice, my gosh, it's just awe-inspiring."

Jenkins, 55, has made history before. In the mid-1990s he became the first black mayor of Lewiston. Last December, he became the first black mayor of Auburn, taking office for a one-year term.

He proved popular during that short period. He promised a more open, inclusive government. He reached out to neighborhoods by holding city council meetings in different wards. He brought back spring trash pickup, a service many residents prized.

But nine months into his term, Jenkins said he wouldn't run for a second. His role as mayor simply took too much time away from his day jobs.

Several people, including Ed and Sheila Desgrosseillers, refused to accept Jenkins' decision.

"We didn't feel we had a good choice for mayor, and we wanted to add one," Ed Desgrosseillers said.

He, his wife and seven others mounted their own Jenkins campaign, even though Jenkins' name wouldn't appear on the ballot.

"We were told from the start a write-in campaign would never be a success, had never been a success," he said.

Undaunted, the group distributed fliers, posted campaign signs, called voters and placed ads in the paper. And since other write-in campaigns failed because voters didn't fill out the ballot correctly, the group handed out instruction cards that explained exactly what a Jenkins voter would have to do.

Jenkins, for his part, simply agreed to serve if elected.

"I kind of said it's a nice gesture, but let's get real here. No one's ever won," he said. "But the citizens were so adamant and so focused."

On Tuesday, Jenkins received 2,166 write-in votes, or more than half of the nearly 4,000 votes cast. The write-in mayoral win was a first in Auburn. Jenkins said he's spoken with several state historians who believe it's a first in Maine as well.

Although the win took him by surprise, Jenkins said he won't back out on his agreement. He was elected. He'll serve.

"Everybody knows where I live now. I think they'd come get me," he joked.

Eric Samson, who was listed on the ballot, came in second with 1,305 votes. Fred Sanborn, who was also on the ballot, came in third with 514 votes. Both men said Wednesday they were concerned that the write-in instruction cards with Jenkins name and address were distributed outside the polling places on Election Day and that some of those cards were found in voting booths.

Desgrosseillers said voters brought the cards with them to ensure they filled out the ballot correctly, while some people accidentally left them behind.

But despite that irregularity, neither Samson nor Sanborn plans to challenge the results.

"I believe 2,100 showed up to vote, and 2,100 people took the time to write in John Jenkins' name," Samson said. "I don't think a recount would be worth anyone's time."

Even though Jenkins vowed to spend less time at city hall in order to focus more time on his day jobs, he said Wednesday he could still accomplish a lot as mayor. All with the help of the new City Council.

"I think we're going to have an excellent, excellent team coming up," he said.

With his surprise win less than 24 hours old, Jenkins was already framing some lofty goals: Turn Auburn into the healthiest community in Maine as a way to attract employers, address domestic violence, hold a conference involving women and working families and talk livable wages.

"I am so excited. I am fired up," he said. "It's good to be needed."

ltice@sunjournal.com

Jenkins won't seek return

Auburn mayor says
he won't be on ballot
for fall election

BY SCOTT TAYLOR
Staff Writer

AUBURN — Saying he was making room for other candidates to step forward, Mayor John Jenkins e-mailed a letter to Auburn city staff Wednesday announcing that he would not seek re-election this fall.

"I realize this position is not something one person should repeatedly occupy," Jenkins



Jenkins

said Wednesday night at his home. "It's not a contest to see how many times you can win. I've held it and now it's time for me to make room for some other individuals to step forward."

It's the second time Jenkins has decided not to seek election for Auburn mayor. He declined to run in 2007, only to be drafted by a write-in campaign. Voters placed him back in office, giving him 54 percent of the vote.

No write-in candidate for mayor or City Council had

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Jenkins

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ever won a seat.

Jenkins had already completed two terms as Lewiston's mayor and a term as a state senator when he took office in December 2006 for a shortened one-year term as Auburn mayor.

During that time, he worked to make city government more public, scheduling a series of neighborhood ward meetings around the city. The meetings each began with an open session for residents to speak directly to their city councilor and the mayor.

There won't be a write-in campaign this time, Jenkins said.

"I don't actually think it will come to that," he said. "I think we'll have good people stepping forward to serve. I think it's time for those people to have a chance."

Jenkins said he'll be happy to advise his successors, if they need it.

"I think that's going to be the extent of my role going forward," he said. "I think it is very important for everyone to have the chance to step forward and fill that role, to serve if they can."

Hall of famer



SCOTT THISTLE/SUN JOURNAL

John Jenkins, left, a former state senator and mayor of Lewiston and Auburn, was recognized by the Maine House of Representatives on Tuesday for his upcoming induction to the USA International Black Belt Hall of Fame in November. Jenkins was honored for his years of public service and his accomplishments as an athlete and instructor by state Rep. Bruce Bickford, R-Auburn, right. Bickford said he and Jenkins have long been friends. "He's my brother from another mother," Bickford said. Jenkins said he was honored. "This recognition is accepted for the many who have been and are part of this journey," he said.

John T. Jenkins

1952 - 2020

AUBURN - John T. Jenkins, 68, of Auburn, died at Maine Medical Center in Portland on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2020, after a brief but valiant battle with cancer.

Born in Newark, N.J., on May 29, 1952, he was the son of John and Jane Ingram Jenkins.

Educated in Newark schools, he was a graduate of Malcolm X Shabazz High School, class of '70. As student body president he met Martin Luther King, just a week before Dr. King's assassination. John fell in love with Maine while earning a B.A. in Psychology at Bates College, graduating in 1974, and made Lewiston his home.

A gifted student athlete, John's martial arts skills took him all over the world, including touring Japan while competing in the Karate World Championship. He won the championship in 1977, and went on to win numerous world championships in a variety of martial arts disciplines. Among his many accolades, John was a member of the Maine State Sports Hall of Fame, World Martial Arts Hall of Fame, and USA International Black Belt Hall of Fame.

In 1980, he became Director of Housing at Bates College, and in 1993 started his political career with a successful run for Mayor of Lewiston. After serving as

State Senator for Maine's 21st District he left politics for a while and worked as a

business consultant and motivational speaker. He moved to Auburn, and in 2007 became mayor, running as a write-in candidate. In a lifetime of firsts, he was the first African American ever to be elected to the Maine State

Senate, and when he became Mayor of Auburn he was the first person in the history of Maine to win any office as a write-in candidate.

John is survived by his long-time closest friend and caregiver, his "Person," Ann Parker of Auburn; a sister, Mujiba Wadud and her husband Aleem Razzaqq of Newark, N.J., a brother, Walter Jenkins of New Jersey; an aunt, Beaurina Mobley; and a host of nieces, nephews, other relations, and many, many close friends.

Besides his parents, he was predeceased by two uncles, Jacob Simmons and Jake Ingram; a niece, Khabira Lateef; and a cousin, Eddie Jackson.

John's remarkable life will be celebrated next summer, time and place to be announced. Private memorial services were held at the Albert and Burpee Funeral Home. Donations, condolences, and a video tribute may be found at www.albert-burpee.com.



Lewiston Sun Journal,
October 11th, 2020

City supports naming footbridge in honor of John Jenkins

BY STAFF REPORT

LEWISTON — A year after former Mayor John Jenkins succumbed to illness and died, leaders in Lewiston and Auburn are looking for a way to honor his memory.

They say they'd like to celebrate the legacy of Jenkins, the late Maine state senator and mayor of both municipalities, by renaming the pedestrian footbridge that connects the cities the John Jenkins Memorial Footbridge.

The two city councils will each consider and vote on the proposed footbridge dedication during meetings Sept. 7.

"Jenkins, who passed away in September of 2020 following a short but valiant fight against cancer, was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey," according to a news release from Auburn on Thursday night. "He fell in love with the area while attending Bates College and after graduating in 1974, he made Lewiston his home after traveling the world, competing in martial arts championships.

Lewiston Sun Journal, September 3rd, 2021

JENKINS

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"Jenkins was an exceptional athlete, becoming a member of the Lewiston-Auburn Sports Hall of Fame, World Martial Arts Hall of Fame, Maine State Sports Hall of Fame, and USA International Black Belt Hall of Fame," the release said. "He also worked with local police departments, providing self-defense and de-escalation training and as a Maine Criminal Justice Academy instructor.

"A mentor, community volunteer, personal trainer, martial arts instructor, motivational speaker, entrepreneur, and more, John Jenkins was a dedicated and enthusi-

astic member of the Auburn-Lewiston community," according to the release, "serving as mayor of each city, winning once as a write-in candidate. He also served as state senator for Maine's 21st District — the first African American ever to be elected to the Senate."

"John was inspiring to so many in our community and beyond," Auburn Mayor Jason Levesque said. "Whether it was his motivational speeches to school kids or his advocacy as mayor and senator, his love for people and for community was evident to all. Naming this bridge after a man that connects and connected the two great cities he loved is not just fitting, it is appropriate."

"As a teenager, I often heard about 'this martial arts guy,' Lewiston Mayor Mary Cayer said, "but over

time, I realized he was much more. Senator Jenkins built many bridges during his public service to both

Lewiston and Auburn, and it is fitting to honor his broad community service with a beautiful pedestrian

bridge connecting our twin cities."

By early Thursday night, the proposal was already getting thumbs-up on social media, with several people highlighting Jenkins' many talents. By then, the idea was already fully supported by city leaders on both sides of the bridge.

"This would be a truly meaningful gesture on the part of both cities," Auburn City Manager Phil

Crowell said. "John Jenkins epitomized community spirit and unity; he was a human bridge between our two cities. I can think of no better way to honor his memory."

"Mayor and Senator Jenkins exhibited such enthusiasm in everything he tackled," Lewiston's interim city administrator, Heather Hunter, said. "He had a way of including everyone in the room and made them feel as if they were a close friend. He had a grand personality and such an infectious smile and laugh — and the stories..."

AUBURN

Councilor's comments shock, draw backlash

Leroy Walker brings up racist concerns during vote renaming bridge for John Jenkins

By STEVE COLLINS
SUN JOURNAL

AUBURN — An Auburn city councilor unleashed a bizarre rant at a public meeting Tuesday in which he said allegations that “dark-colored people” recently breaking laws in the South constituted “a black mark” against an esteemed African American

who once served as the city’s mayor.

The comments came during a brief council discussion of a proposal by Auburn and Lewiston to rename a pedestrian bridge across the Androscoggin River to honor John Jenkins, who served as mayor in Lewiston from 1994 to 1998 and later in Auburn. He died in September 2020.



Leroy Walker

is running unopposed for reelection, said that “what’s go-

The proposal passed unanimously, but not before City Councilor Leroy Walker weighed in.

Walker, who has represented Ward 5 since 2011 and

ing on down there” in “Alabama and them areas” are the sort of “things that put a bad name on good people like John Jenkins.”

It is unclear what possible connection there could be between a deceased former mayor and the unidentified criminal activities that Walker described.

“It’s only because of the color of his skin,” Walker said in a

phone interview Wednesday.

Councilor Katie Boss said she was shocked to hear Walker’s comments.

“There is no place for overt racism here,” she said later in the session. “Publicly honoring an honorable Black man should not be an issue in this community.”

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WALKER

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Boss said the episode highlighted the need for more discussion about diversity, equity and inclusion within the community and urged officials to take steps to embrace efforts to combat racism.

Walker said Wednesday he “didn’t catch” everything Boss said because “with these crazy masks, half of it is mumbled,” but he heard enough to decide he had no interest in countering her.

“I knew John really, really well,” Walker said, and had no problem naming the bridge after him.

Councilor Belinda Gerry called him “the great John Jenkins” and recalled how he was always there “to help you and motivate you.”

She said she was sorry to hear about a number of phone calls that Walker got, adding that Jenkins was “a gentleman” and that race shouldn’t be interjected into the issue of the bridge dedication.

Walker said he simply wanted everyone to know that some people in the community were wary of the idea.

He said Wednesday that he heard from local people “who were upset about what they were seeing” on videos from hurricane-hit areas of “Black people looting and breaking into places.”

“It left a bad taste in everybody’s mouth,” Walker said, and caused some to worry the city was only naming the bridge for Jenkins as a carrot for the fast-growing Black community.

“The timing was bad,” Walker said, and he felt the need “to put it out there” so everyone would know of the concerns by some white residents.

After a news story recently detailed the plan to name the old railroad bridge after Jenkins, a Bates College graduate who fell in love with the Twin Cities, Walker said he told the council he received “a few phone calls” related to the proposal.

He proceeded to say that “since we’ve had the floods that have happened down in Alabama and them areas” — perhaps a reference to the damage done by Hurricane Ida this month — “it really has made a black mark toward John Jenkins because of what’s going on down there with the dark-colored people breaking in, looting (sic), stealing and every other thing.”

Officials in the hurricane-hit area have made some arrests for looting and related crimes, but there is no evidence that it’s been especially bad or that African Americans are uniquely responsible for any illegal activity.

After a news story recently detailed the plan to name the old railroad bridge after John Jenkins, a Bates College graduate who fell in love with the Twin Cities, Walker said he told the council he received “a few phone calls” related to the proposal.

Walker, though, persisted during Tuesday’s meeting.

“So I’ve had some calls that people are very upset that we’re trying to place ourself (sic) in a position

that, uh, some of the words have been 'be special to the Black people' so that we don't have to worry about the type of things that are going on in these areas," he said.

"And I really feel bad because John Jenkins and I pretty well grew up together," Walker said "and I know John Jenkins would never in his life ever be part of what's going on in these areas."

"But I had to say something because they are the types of things that put a bad name on good people like John Jenkins," Walker said. "And I'm sorry that has happened."

Councilor Holly Lasagna said if anyone should have "a bad name" from this, it's the people who called Walker, not Jenkins.

Lisa Savage, an independent candidate for U.S. Senate last year, asked on Twitter, "How can someone believe that anyone who's perceived as the same color as someone else is respon-

sible for the actions of similar-appearing people far away? More to the point, how can Leroy Walker be a good councilor for Auburn's Black residents if he believes this?"

Walker worked for the city of Auburn for 39 years, including serving as its park superintendent. In that time, he said, he got to know Jenkins well.

On the city's website, he said he "hopes to serve the taxpayers of Auburn with dignity and pride. He is confident that he and the rest of the Auburn Council will accomplish great things while in office."

Jenkins, a New Jersey native, was a motivational speaker and martial arts expert who was elected to the state Senate representing Lewiston in 1996, the first African American to serve in the Senate. He also won elections to serve as mayor of Auburn and Lewiston, including a write-in campaign for mayor in Auburn

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in 2007.

Walker said that when he worked in the recreation department, Jenkins would often come to city playgrounds and teach youngsters karate, breaking boards and letting "the kids break something," too.

"We had a lot of fun with John," Walker said. "John earned our respect."

Jenkins died on Sept. 30, 2020 of cancer at the age of 68.

Lewiston, Auburn to honor beloved former mayor with footbridge dedication and a celebration of life



Ann Parker, seen Friday afternoon on the footbridge spanning the Androscoggin River between Lewiston and Auburn, holds a book that she spearheaded to honor her longtime partner, John Jenkins.

By ANDREW RICE
SUN JOURNAL

LEWISTON — When John Jenkins was told that his cancer was aggressively spreading, he looked at his longtime partner, Ann Parker, with tears coming down his cheeks.

“He said, ‘But my story isn’t finished yet,’” Parker said this week.

Parker has thought about those words since Jenkins died in the fall of 2020, when the pandemic prevented her from organizing a memorial fit for the beloved former mayor of Lewiston and Auburn.

But finally, memorial events planned for June 10-11 will mark the continuation of his story, Parker said.

A public memorial service and celebration of life for Jenkins will be held

Saturday, June 11, at the Lewiston Armory. The day before, both cities will host an official dedication ceremony for the John T. Jenkins Memorial Footbridge, the popular footbridge connecting the Twin Cities. A new book written by a fellow Bates College alum also chronicles his life.

“His story doesn’t have to end,” Parker said about all the tributes coming together.

Jenkins, a New Jersey native, was a motivational speaker and martial arts expert who was elected to the state Senate representing Lewiston in 1996, the first African American to serve in the Senate. He also won elections for mayor of Auburn and Lewiston, including a write-in campaign for mayor in Auburn in 2007.

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JENKINS

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Parker said the last year and a half has been difficult not only because of her grieving but because she's received so many calls, texts, emails, or questions from people on the street about Jenkins and a memorial.

"I'm pleased to be able to finally have the proper celebration that John deserves, and that the community deserves," she said. "People just want to say goodbye and Godspeed to someone who meant so much to so many people."

When Jenkins was diagnosed with cancer in the spring of 2020, he kept it private.

He was still out and about in the community, and because he was "such a man of the public," Parker said, he still wanted to be around people he knew without the focus being on himself.

Jenkins was so well-liked and known by so many people that he couldn't walk into a restaurant for lunch without being there for hours talking to people, she said.

"People would always come up to him and tell him he taught them karate when they were a kid, or spoke at their high school graduation. These are people who are older now, and he just impacted that many people," she said.

But his privacy around his health also made the news of his death a surprise to some.

"He and I both really felt he would beat this. You know, he was John Jenkins," Parker said.

Jenkins died Sept. 30, 2020, at the age of 68.

He attended Bates College in Lewiston, graduating in 1974, and "fell in love with Maine," according to his obituary.

Jenkins' was well known for his martial arts skills, winning several world championships in multiple disciplines, and is in the Maine State Sports Hall of Fame, World Martial Arts Hall of Fame, and USA International Black Belt Hall of Fame.

For the last year and a half, a group of eight people have been working on projects aimed at keeping Jenkins' legacy alive. The effort, which includes several of Jenkins' former Bates College classmates, began with a scholarship fund and now includes a new book on Jenkins' life.

All proceeds from the book will go to the scholarship fund, a \$50,000 fund that was recently matched by Bates College.

Parker said the book, written by Jenkins' classmate Chuck Radis, features people who knew Jenkins through various chapters of his life, from his college days to karate to his public service.

She said after trying to plan something in 2021, she finally felt like this spring was the opportunity to host an event where the entire community could honor Jenkins.

Parker has had help from some longtime friends of Jenkins, including musicians Kathy Haley, Deb Morin, Greg Boardman and Denny Breau, all of whom will perform during the June 11 celebration.

Former Lewiston mayor and a friend of Jenkins, Paul Dionne, has also helped organize the June 11 memorial.

Last fall, the city councils in both cities voted unanimously to name the footbridge connecting Lewiston and Auburn after Jenkins "in honor of his commitment and passion for both cities."

Leading up to the formal dedication at 5:30 p.m., each city will host activities on their side of the bridge. Auburn will host a karate and tai chi demonstration, and Lewiston will highlight Jenkins' commitment to literacy.

According to Dottie Perham-Whittier, Lewiston's community relations coordinator, signs will be installed on both sides of the bridge and the 5:30 p.m. ribbon-cutting will take place at the center of the bridge, with comments from Lewiston Mayor Carl Sheline.

There will also be a musical performance and tribute by the Maine Cycling Club.

For the month of June, Auburn's series of storyboards along the riverwalk will be dedicated to Jenkins.

"In preparing for the bridge renaming event, those involved from both cities have been enthusiastic about celebrating a gentleman who served both cities, the state, and in a multitude of other ways," Perham-Whittier said. "John was a friend to all, a unifier, and a tremendous ambassador for his community. He could unite a room by his mere presence, and the symbolic meaning of the word bridge, that of a connector, reflects well on his character, integrity, and belief in the value of every human being."