

A B O U T  
Life

# The Price He's Paid

*Gene Parks' war with city hall has taken a harsh toll.*

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

It was Sunday morning at Mr. P's, the south-side private club that Gene Parks is taking over from his father. Parks and I were the only ones in the place.

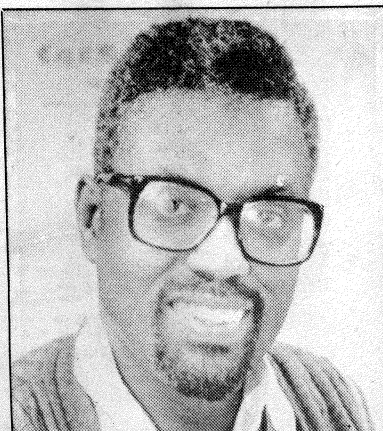
Gene had been cleaning up when I knocked on the locked door. He let me in, locked up again, and now we were sitting at a table. There was nothing on the table except the tape recorder.

I asked him what impact the last year has had on him—the year since Mayor Joe Sensenbrenner fired him as Madison's affirmative action officer. What about the rumors about him drinking too much? That he and his wife are separated? That his conduct has become paranoid? He thought awhile. I turned on the recorder.

"The impact," he said, "is that my family and I are separated. Marilyn and I agreed that the children—the four of them—go with her. We are not divorced, and we don't know if we will be, but we are living apart.

"The children have suffered enormously. They've had some difficulty understanding the sacrifices I've made," he said. "It's been terrible for all of them, for my wife. But they didn't have much choice in the matter. I would do it all over again if I had a choice.

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MORRY GASH

Parks: He'd do it all again.

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# Paying the Price

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"My home is in foreclosure," he continued. "Yeah, I hear the rumors, but you see, I know why the rumors are there. They happen to everyone in a position like mine, doing what I have done.

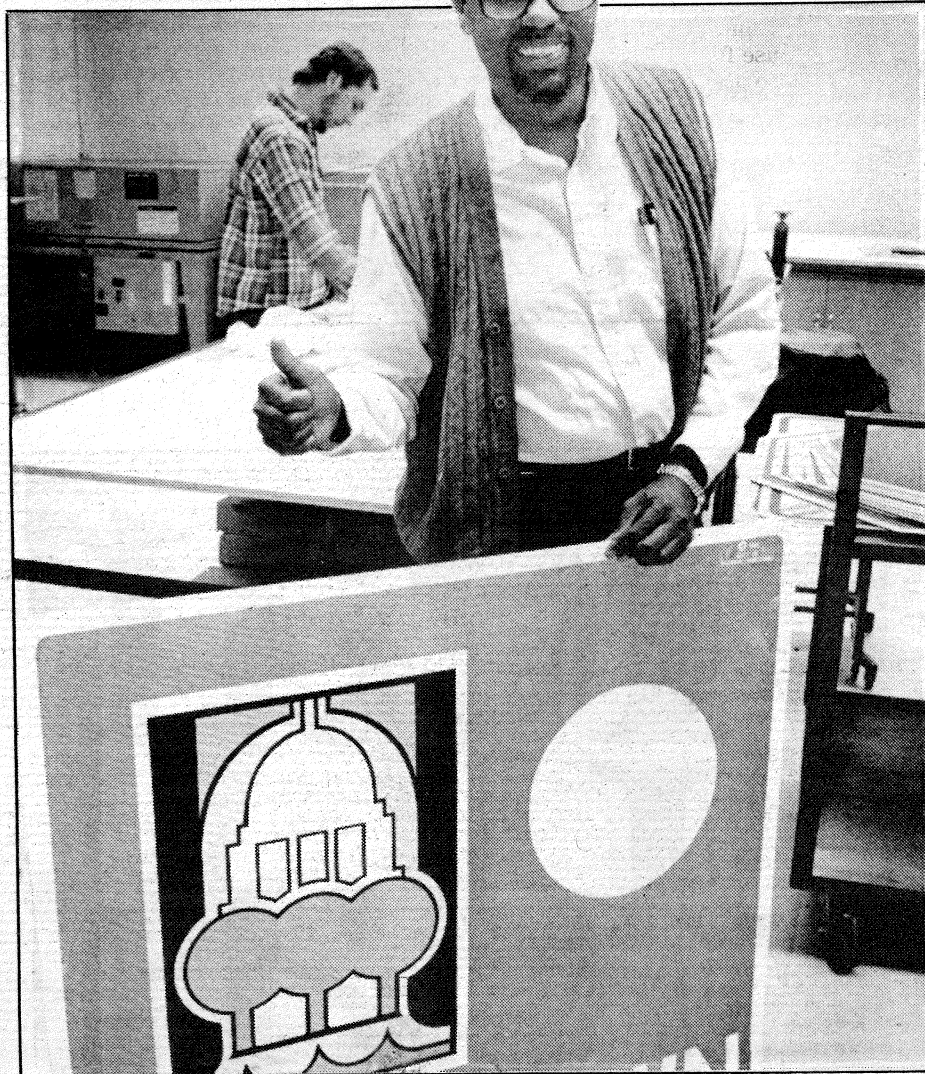
"If people can't attack your argument directly, they attack it indirectly," Parks noted. "They try to reduce you as a person.

"Rumors about me were around long before I got fired. I really think one of the reasons I got fired was because I got on the steps of the City-County Building and said: 'You want to discuss rumors about me? Let's discuss the rumors about you!'

"It's okay to talk about whether I've got a drinking problem, but it ain't okay to talk about whether the governor has a drinking problem. It wasn't okay to talk about the mayor's problems. Well, that's bullcrap.

"I called the Common Council 'whores,' and the progressive, liberal community said: 'Oh, gee. This is sexist. This is wrong. He shouldn't use

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Parks at work: 'I didn't break any of the written rules.'

MORRY GASH

## Yes, Gene Parks Oversees Sign Painting

Things seem to get stranger and stranger in the Gene Parks saga.

Who can imagine the controversial civil rights activist supervising the painting of city traffic signs? But that was the job city officials picked for Parks after the courts ordered the city to rehire him.

Fired as the city's affirmative action officer in October 1988 for alleged poor performance, Parks has been battling to regain his job and restore his reputation—a fight, as George Vukelich reports, that has come at considerable cost to his family.

Parks scored a big victory five weeks ago when Circuit Court Judge Daniel Moeser ruled he was entitled to a city job equal to the one he held prior to becoming affirmative action officer.

Moeser noted Parks had been on leave as assistant to the fire chief when he was appointed affirmative action officer in July 1986. The

words of the city ordinance protecting his reinstatement rights were "plain, unambiguous and clearly understandable," Moeser said.

The city decided against appealing the decision. Parks has been paid \$14,062 in back salary dating to June 21, 1989, when he applied for reinstatement. He plans to file a new suit Friday asking for back pay and interest, plus legal fees, dating to his termination date in November 1988.

Parks has five other lawsuits and discrimination complaints pending against the city for his firing.

Parks' troubles began in June 1988 following a parking lot confrontation with a member of the Madison Area Technical College governing board who had reneged on a public promise to vote for a black candidate for district director.

Parks was officially reprimanded by Mayor Joseph Sensenbrenner—a move that touched off a feud between the two men. Parks became

increasingly critical of city officials, suggesting at one point they were engaging in oral sex with developers, and was fired four months later for allegedly mishandling his duties as affirmative action officer. (On Tuesday, Parks apologized for the oral sex comment.)

Following his court victory, the Wisconsin State Journal editorialized that Parks' talents should be tapped to deal with the problems of south Madison; instead Mayor Paul Soglin appointed him "sign operations supervisor."

In a four-page memo, Soglin said he had hoped to find a better job for Parks, who also manages a members-only club, but opted for the traffic-sign post because Parks' attorney was uncooperative and the Common Council was reluctant to create a special job for Parks.

One council leader comments: "Certainly the city is not welcoming Gene Parks back with open arms."

—Marc Eisen



## PARKS

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language like that.

"The great Jim Graaskamp said that the Common Council didn't have 'balls,' and a few weeks ago they named a park after Jim Graaskamp. Now, you know that 'Gene Parks Park' ain't gonna happen in this town!"

Parks makes no secret of the fact that he was disappointed by the conduct of people who consider themselves liberals and moderates. They joined the mob that "lynched" him, he complains.

"Sensenbrenner didn't fire me by himself," Parks says. "The liberals all gave him the go-ahead to do it. And these are the same people who have a problem with El Salvador and South Africa. We've got a lot of hypocrites here."

For this listener, who remembers both a younger Gene Parks and a younger Paul Soglin, Parks' assessment

of their relationship comes as somewhat of a surprise.

"Paul Soglin and I were never tight," Parks says. "We were just associates, even when we were on the council together and got arrested together. We were never friends."

But during Soglin's campaign against Joe Sensenbrenner, didn't Soglin say that if he had been mayor, he never would let what happened to Gene Parks happen?

"Never mind what he said during the campaign—look at his actions," Parks says. "When Soglin came into office, he could have cleared this all up on his own and rehired me as affirmative action officer. He could have done that, or he could have allowed the city to place me back in the classified service."

Soglin chose not to do that. Parks points out that the mayor's decision was based on legal advice that candidate Soglin had criticized during the campaign.

"Paul Soglin let me down," Parks

says, "but I'm not into simply pointing the finger at him. There's a whole cast of characters in this controversy. There are a whole lot of people in this town who know they should have done what I did—and they refused to do it."

"Well, not all people," he amends. "A few came right out and spoke up for me. Ann Sulton, Joe Szwaja, Rev. Tenolian Bell. And there were a number of ministers who wrote really great letters to Sensenbrenner opposing him."

Other people were less supportive. He recalls one particular Saturday during the last year when some black leaders came to him and asked that he "be quiet." They wanted "to work some things."

"I know what that means," he scoffs. "I said to them: 'Why are you asking me to be quiet? Why don't you join me out here?'"

Parks remembers another group made up of white and black folks who were "furiously" holding meetings to which

he was not invited. "They even held a Sunday meeting with Sensenbrenner at the City-County Building. Black folks. White folks. All my friends—and they're not calling me!"

"What they were trying to do was manage the system. What they were trying to do was keep things 'under control.' Well, I couldn't accept that. And how many times have I heard: 'He wouldn't let us help him.'"

Parks admits that he isn't the only one who has to live with his decisions. "My daughter," he says very quietly, "graduated from high school, and I didn't have 10 cents to give her for graduation. That's pain. She's at Michigan State now. I had to give her a check, which she still has. This week, as soon as I get my back pay, she can cash it."

Parks says that the American system has to be shaken up, and he takes pride in the fact he was doing it according to the rules.

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"I didn't break any of the written rules," he says. "I was breaking the unwritten rules. They say I was fired for not doing my job, for 'poor performance.' But that's a lie. It wasn't poor performance. It was great performance. I was fired for doing my job."

"There is no way that I would ever retract my statement about the MATC board. There is no way I would retreat on these issues. No way in hell. I'm glad

I did it. The city pays me \$50,000 a year, and it doesn't want to know what I think? This is dumb."

"I just hope," he says, "that my speaking out has given other people the courage to speak. The system is enormously frightened of people who learn to speak up for themselves, and who don't just accept things as they are. We need more people shaking the system." ■