Joe Delpit, private citizen, has new priorities

Joe Delpit assured his place in Baton Rouge political history when he became the city’s first black elected official in 1968 by winning an alderman seat on the city-parish council.

Delpit recalled one white power-broker from north Baton Rouge, a man who later helped his campaign, telling him before the election to save his money because a black candidate could not win a council seat.

With four times as many white voters as blacks, Delpit had his doubts, too.

“In reality, when it came down to an election, I just did not think whites would vote for a black, me or any other black,” Delpit said.

“But there were enough whites in this community who felt, ‘Let’s do the right thing,’” that I was elected,”

It was the start of a 24-year career in public office that saw Delpit rise to speaker pro tem of the Louisiana House of Representatives and become a powerful political force.

He gave up his legislative seat in 1991, deciding not to seek a fifth term representing his south Baton Rouge district.

Disillusionment with then-Gov. Buddy Roemer, the growing demands of his business enterprises and a desire to spend more time with his family led to his decision not to seek re-election, Delpit said.

“You have to understand, 24 years is a long time,” Delpit said. “I began losing the fire I had in it. I wanted to be remembered as a champion and just walk away from it rather than getting a reputation as someone who runs because they like the title, but then don’t deliver.”

Delpit said he had his hands full in any event with restaurant, nursing home and oil-field service businesses that now gross more than $7.5 million a year.

An often controversial figure, Delpit was the subject of federal and state inquiries.
Delpit

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vestigations over the years. In 1988, he was tried in a pardons-for-sale scheme and found innocent.

Delpit had admitted taking $25,000 from an undercover agent, but said he was trying to “bust a drug dealer” as well as prove that then-Pardon Board chairman Howard Marsellus was selling pardons.

“I was trying to play policeman,” Delpit said.

Delpit blames his legal problems on politically ambitious prosecutors. He said the probes and the headlines “affected my family tremendously.”

Delpit said he is content now out of the limelight. At age 54, he’s enjoying spending time with his wife, children and grandchildren.

“I’m re-prioritizing my life,” Delpit said. “My family is first, then my business and me.”

He remains a political power and stays active in community organizations, however.

“I’ll be involved in politics from the womb to the tomb, but I don’t think you have to be elected to office to be involved.”

— Greg Garland