

PRESS RELEASE

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FELICIA SIMMONS - LET THE PEOPLE WHO WERE THERE BE HEARD!

Written by Felicia Simmons

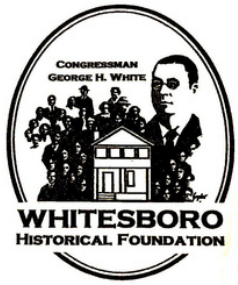
WHITESBORO, N.J. — I am writing this because I believe it is important for the public to hear from someone who was actually there.

I have known Dr. Dale Caldwell and his father for many years. In all that time, I have seen nothing but integrity, commitment and a genuine concern for people and community. But more relevant to the current moment is my own firsthand experience as the organizer of the Whitesboro Gala.

I was one of the people directly involved in coordinating the 2026 Whitesboro Black History Gala. I was the contact with the Lieutenant Governor's office, and I received an email informing me that guests would be attending. I also received a phone call from members of his staff regarding the space that would be needed.

So when I hear the suggestion that Dr. Caldwell simply "showed up with guests," I believe that characterization deserves to be questioned. The investigation and public discussion should include the people who actually organized and coordinated the event. That includes me, Rev. Elorm Ocansey, Assistant Pastor, Transformation International Chapel, and Mrs. Shirley Green, Executive Director, Whitesboro Historical Foundation.

We were honored to have Lieutenant Governor Caldwell attend the Whitesboro Gala and recognize the historical significance of Whitesboro. His presence was meaningful because Whitesboro represents an important part of New Jersey's history, a community whose story deserves to be remembered, respected, and brought into the wider public conversation.



But there is another reason this moment matters to me.

Government must protect the people and their right to be heard. The Lieutenant Governor's role is not simply ceremonial. In our system of government, elected leaders have a responsibility to protect democratic institutions and make sure that the voices of the people are not pushed aside.

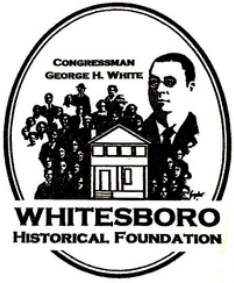
I know something about what it means when those voices are threatened. I have experienced firsthand what it means to fight for the right to participate in our democracy and to run for public office. There have been times in our history when Black citizens and entire communities were denied equal political participation, including through governmental actions and the courts.

Those are not just stories from a history book to me. They are part of the history that shaped people like me. That is why representation in government matters so much.

When I look at the office of Lieutenant Governor, I see an opportunity to have someone in a position of leadership who understands that government must serve We the People, not simply the people with the loudest voices, the greatest resources, or the most political influence. I know firsthand the importance of having an elected leader willing to stand up when someone's right to participate is being challenged. That experience has stayed with me.

We need leaders who understand that voting rights are not abstract principles. They are personal. They determine whether ordinary citizens can have a voice in the decisions that affect their families, their neighborhoods, and their communities. And when Black communities have historically been excluded, suppressed or denied equal political power, we should be especially careful about dismissing the importance of representation today.

I believe Governor Mikie Sherrill made an important choice in selecting Dr. Dale Caldwell as Lieutenant Governor. His position carries historic significance, particularly as New Jersey's first Black elected male Lieutenant Governor.



That representation matters. It matters to Black communities in New Jersey. It matters to young people who need to see themselves reflected in positions of leadership. And it matters to every New Jersey resident who believes that our government should represent all of its people.

I come from a community where I have seen firsthand what happens when certain voices are overlooked. My home city of Asbury Park, as well as communities like Franklin Township in Somerset County and other places throughout New Jersey, have histories and residents whose contributions have too often gone unseen or unheard.

Whitesboro is another prime example. That is why having the Lieutenant Governor present at an event recognizing Whitesboro was significant to me. It showed respect for a history that deserves to be acknowledged and for communities whose stories deserve a place in New Jersey's future.

Let firsthand witnesses be heard.

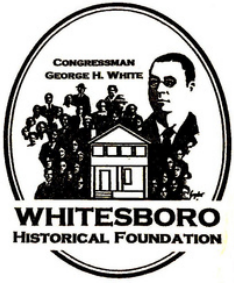
I am not asking anyone to accept my opinion simply because I have known Dr. Caldwell for years. I am asking that my firsthand experience, and the firsthand experiences of others who were involved be considered before conclusions are drawn.

If questions have been raised about the Whitesboro Black History Gala, then the people who organized the event and communicated with the Lieutenant Governor's office should be heard.

I was there. I was involved. I know the communications I received and what I witnessed.

There is a difference between asking legitimate questions and allowing an incomplete narrative to become accepted as fact.

Dr. Dale Caldwell deserves a fair hearing, just as anyone else would.



For me, defending him is not about protecting a politician. It is about protecting the truth of what I personally witnessed. It is about recognizing the historical importance of Whitesboro. It is about protecting the voices of communities that have too often been unseen and unheard. And it is about remembering that democracy only works when We the People are actually allowed to participate in it.

I believe we need leaders who understand that. We need leaders who understand the history of disenfranchisement and the damage it can do to entire communities. We need leaders who recognize that protecting someone's right to participate in democracy is not a favor, it is a responsibility.

I have known Dr. Dale Caldwell and his father. I know the legacy from which Dale comes. But I am also paying attention to the man he is today and the work he is undertaking now. I have seen his commitment to bringing attention to communities and people who have historically not always had a seat at the table.

That is why I feel compelled to speak. Because when someone has stood up for the principle that ordinary people deserve a voice, I believe we should stand up for them as well. This is about more than one gala, one investigation or one political office.

It is about whether the people of New Jersey—all the people of New Jersey will be seen, heard and respected.

That is what I believe We the People deserve.

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Felicia Simmons is a lifelong resident of Asbury Park, New Jersey and was twice elected to the Asbury Park Board of Education. She currently serves as the President/Executive Director of Wcc Historic Renovation Association Inc. and is a lead partner in the Whitesboro Historic Preservation Project. She's a mother, recording artist, published poet, former TEDX speaker, and dedicated community leader in New Jersey.