

It's a wonderful life for one board member who finds joy in building his hometown

Corey Branch's life could be a plot from an old-fashioned movie. It's a story about one man's love of home that began when he was a child and continues to sustain his work as an elected official helping local residents.

Born in Raleigh's District C, Branch has fond memories of growing up in the community he now represents on the Raleigh City Council. District C was where he explored his community on his bike, attended church with his parents and learned and played at organizations including the African American Leaders of Tomorrow and the Boys Club. It's where he took the bus to and from his summer job at the mall.

"For me, it was fun," he says of his childhood. "People knew each other and weren't as divisive as they are now."

Branch attended Fuller Elementary School, Ligon Middle School and Enloe High School, leaving home for just four years to earn a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro in 2000. He says because he was never the smartest person at school, he gave everything extra effort.

"I graduated in four years, but I wasn't a 4.0 student," he says. "I was just a student that worked hard. Nothing came easy; I had to work for it. And I'm still working to this day."

After graduation, Branch returned home to work at IBM, and eight years later when AT&T bought his division, he stayed on, rising through the ranks to his current position as Associate Director of Technology.

Although he worked on election campaigns for others and, as a student, was involved in promoting voting, Branch says he never imagined himself running for elected office. That changed in 2011 when he noticed that Raleigh's African American leaders were 20 and 30 years older than he was.

"I just felt like I could be a voice and looking around at the challenges we face," he says.

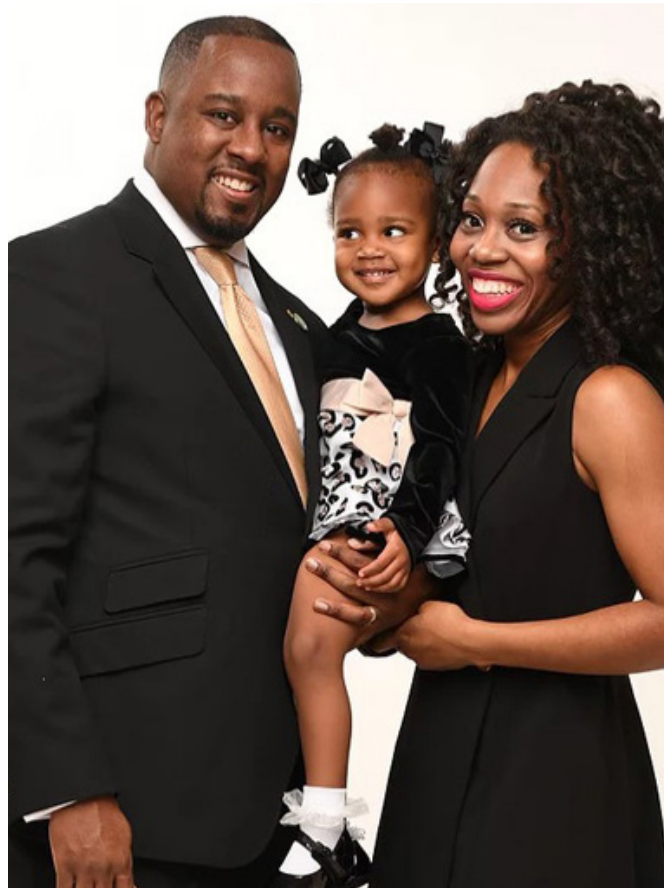
He lost that election but ran again in 2015 and has been re-elected ever since, driven by a desire to make life better for his community.

"The challenges we face now are basically the same challenges from 40 years ago, and I'm 43," he says, listing those obstacles as affordable housing, rising inflation coupled with a stagnant minimum wage and a need for a comprehensive transit network.

Formerly Raleigh's Mayor Pro Tem, Branch is trying to tackle some of these issues by chairing the Raleigh City Council's Transportation and Transit Committee and representing the City of Raleigh on the GoTriangle and Passage Home boards. He also serves on the city council's Economic Development and Innovation Committee and is the council liaison for the Fair Housing Board.

Since being elected, he counts among his achievements leading – with then councilwoman Mary-Ann Baldwin – Raleigh's successful passage of the 1-cent property tax in 2016 dedicated to increasing the supply of affordable housing. That tax helped fund the rehabilitation of homes and provided tax credits to build new housing. More recently, he also helped get an \$80 million affordable housing bond referendum before the voters during the November 2020 elections. They approved it with 72 percent of Raleigh residents voting in favor. The referendum specified that some of the money raised would go toward building affordable housing along transit lines.

Branch says he is proud of his work in improving transportation – even before his election – as a committee member who helped mold and develop the Wake Transit Plan. He is thrilled to see the plan create bus service in areas of Raleigh that had never had public transportation such as the Barwell community that GoRaleigh Routes 17 and 18 now serve. Another success, he says, is the passage of the 2017 transportation bond issue to help fund road projects as well as sidewalks to bus shelters, he says.



Being a GoTriangle board member is important to him as he works to ensure that all Triangle residents are well connected to reliable transit to and from work, he says. "I look at it from the equity standpoint," he says. And he wants GoTriangle operators to know he cares about them, appreciates the difficulty of their work and is working in their interest.

"As the city grows, I understand the challenges they face with dealing with traffic," he says. "We're trying to find ways to make it easier for them, but just know that I'm fighting. I'm not one of those people who is going to be on the side of the road yelling and screaming. That doesn't mean I'm not fighting." Although working on big projects, such as bond issues and Chavis Park renovations – he worked with his staff to ensure that eight community centers at the park gained heating and air conditioning – are important, he says it's the personal connections he makes that bring him the most joy.

"I think for me the biggest things are the things that really would never get press coverage – those individual calls that I receive where someone needs help and being able to help that person either connect someone to find a job or understand a city process," he says. "Those conversations are the things that to me matter. I love the big things as far as passing a housing bond, but it's great when you can connect people to those services."

He recalls such a conversation from last summer when he received a text from a local resident and spouse who were about to be evicted from a hotel. "They needed help, and I was able to connect them with an organization the city had given money to," he says. "And the organization was able to work with them and assist them and help them stay with a roof over their head."

While he stays busy addressing the needs of residents in his district, Branch says he is also aware of his responsibilities as a father of a toddler and a role model to the next generation, just as he looked up to elected elders growing up. He tries to strike a balance between family and work commitments, and when he has time, he likes to travel to local universities to talk with students.

"When I think back on my childhood, I was one of those that watched when people didn't know I was watching," he says. "But I keep that today to realize someone is always watching you. ... That's why I just try to do what's right even when it's difficult. And one rule that keeps me going at the end of the day is that I have to live with myself."

Pictured above are Branch with his wife, Chanda, and their daughter, Carleigh.