



Life's hardships motivated new board member to run for elected office

It was 1986 when Brenda Howerton decided to make a fresh start in life. A divorced mother of four living in Danville, Virginia, she packed her family's belongings into a rented truck and moved to Durham.

"I thought I'd grown as much as I could grow in Danville," recalls Howerton, who was recently appointed Durham County's representative to GoTriangle's Board of Trustees. "I'd visited Durham and the Research Triangle Park, and I saw all of the development there, and I just really got excited about that growth – personal and professional – and felt that this was a place that I could grow."

When she arrived in Durham with no place to stay, she pulled into a mall parking lot and called the only person she knew. "She said, 'Come to my house and we'll figure it out,'" Howerton recalls. "So I went to her house, and she called people she knew to get me a place to stay. And I've been here ever since."

Thirty-five years later, Howerton has risen to become one of the Triangle's influential elected officials. She chairs Durham County's Board of Commissioners and serves or has served on numerous local, state and national boards and commissions. Now in her 13th year as a Durham County commissioner, she has worked on initiatives that range from children's health and education to criminal justice and economic development.

Growing up on a tobacco farm in Caswell County, North Carolina, where her family was far from prominent, Howerton says she never imagined holding elected office. She lived a quiet life, going to school, getting married, struggling to break the color barrier to gain employment and taking classes at the local community college.

"I considered that [elected office] was something that other people do – people who had money, people who had a lot of influence. I just didn't think it was something that I would do," she says. "But you know what I learned about life experiences – they can move you to take on challenges bigger than you ever imagined."

Life experiences that have directed her to do her work include losing two of her children, being a Black female, raising four children on her own as a divorced parent and trying to get reliable transportation to and from work, she says, adding, "So all of those things just kinda set the pathway for how my life turns out, the things that I'm committed to."

When she first arrived in Durham, supporting her four children, two of whom were in college, was foremost on her mind. She found temporary work in Durham's Department of Crime Control and Public Safety while she studied at Shaw University where she graduated with a bachelor's in business management. A Shaw professor helped her find a job working for a state representative where she was first introduced to the inner workings of the N.C. legislature.

"I was taking 18 credit hours at the school and working 40 hours a week," Howerton says, admitting with a laugh that she does not know how she survived that grueling schedule. "I just felt I had to advance myself and I needed that degree to make it happen."

After attending Shaw, Howerton earned a certificate in executive coaching from North Carolina State University and began working with clients that ranged from Rolls Royce in Indianapolis to Triangle-area businesses. The Rolls Royce job required her to work on site for three weeks of every month, a difficult situation because it kept her away from home. Still, she says the pay – \$3,000 a day – eventually allowed her buy the condominium in Durham where she now lives.

It was during a weekend retreat when she was coaching North Carolina Central University students to follow their career dreams that her life took a new trajectory.

“I was coaching them to stretch themselves, saying, ‘Don’t be afraid; you are good enough, so just do the things that are in your heart to do,’ ” she says. “And then they challenged me to do the same.”

Pushed into action, Howerton took time to consider what she wanted to do with her life and came to a realization.

“I’ve always been interested in wanting the best outcomes for everybody,” she says. “And I’ve always been concerned about youth and teachers and about fairness and equity in our community. So I did some reflection about what could I do to help and what could I do that would be able to lift voices that are not heard.”

She quit her job at Rolls Royce and signed up to run for a seat on the Durham County Soil and Water Conservation District Board, where she believed she could get her feet wet politically and learn without being on the front line of elected office.

As a commissioner, she’s proud of leading work to ensure that all children thrive. She began that initiative – which continues today – in 2017 when she became the first Durham resident elected president of the North Carolina Association of Counties. She and other commissioners from across the state were compelled by studies that showed the importance of ensuring that children avoid trauma, especially through age five.

“We did a lot of research in bringing other counties together, and what we found out was that children can’t thrive if parents are not thriving, having decent places to live, they don’t have food, they don’t have the necessities,” she says.

After moving to Durham, Howerton says, her experience as a single mother driving an unreliable used car to get to work helped her appreciate the importance of public transit. She is happy to be sitting on the GoTriangle board working to help build a more connected system, especially because she also works to promote economic development and job creation and training.

“Jobs connect to transit,” she says. “People have to have a mode of transportation to get to the jobs. So my commitment to economic development and jobs, it all rolls together.”

She says she is also passionate about racial equity and is proud that the Durham County Board of Commissioners is working to create a citizen-led racial equity commission to address systemic racism. She is excited, too, about leading an effort that designated Juneteenth as a new day off for Durham County employees to celebrate the emancipation of those who had been enslaved in the United States.

Lately, the efforts of others have brought her joy, too, even as she continues to work through the terrible death of her son, Charlie Lamont Howerton. He was a Hampton College student who had organized a Martin Luther King celebration when he was shot after defending a classmate and breaking up a fight, she says. In November, his fellow students and friends raised money through a Zoom party to start an endowment fund in his name, and she expects the first university grant will be awarded this year.

“It was so amazing; there were so many students on the Zoom,” she says. “I had no idea that they loved him ... after all these years, they still love him that much. I tell people who have lost loved ones that it’s not something you get over, you learn to live in spite of it, and you find a place to put that energy; otherwise, it can take you over. So through a lot of meditation and prayer, I was directed to do what I do. And I don’t do it for me. I do it for the people that I represent.”