

Citizen of the Month

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LOYALTY—JOHNNIE WRIGHT, SR.

HONORED FOR LOYALTY: ORANGEBURG COUNTY COUNCIL CHAIRMAN JOHNNIE WRIGHT SR. EARNS CHARACTER AWARD



Johnnie Wright Sr. has an easygoing disposition and bright smile that radiates warmth among those he works with in his various capacities, including serving as a more than 20-year member of the Orangeburg County Council and his leadership role with the South Carolina Association of Counties.

Wright rarely misses meetings, including those he attends as part of his participation with The One Orangeburg County Initiative and as chairman of the Lake Marion Regional Water Agency, which works to provide safe drinking water in that area.

He often touts his love for the county and the well-being of its residents, along with the respect and admiration he holds for his family, which includes his wife, Vernell, and the six children and 14 grandchildren they share between them.

It is the 72-year-old's demonstration of a firm and constant support to his family and community that led the Orangeburg County Community of Character initiative to honor him for his loyalty.

With his signature humility, Wright said the honor didn't just belong to him, but "everybody else."

"I was very surprised, but then at the same time you're grateful and appreciative that somebody sees that in you. We have a lot of loyal people here. So I don't take this honor by myself. It's a team effort," Wright said.

Wright, who will turn 73 on Sept. 7, said his work to enhance the county in its economic, physical and social development does not come by chance.

"I love my county, and I love people. I feel in anything that you do, you should be loyal and committed to it. We all have our flaws, but to me, loyalty means doing what you have to do to make a difference in helping people and working with people," Wright said.

He added, "I'm loyal to what I have (and do). I say to God when I get to the point where I'm always complaining about what I do, or I don't like coming to meetings, that's my time to get off."

Wright was one of 16 children born to Sam and Rosa Lee Wright in Eutawville.

He credits his father, a Baptist deacon, for the values that were instilled in him at an early age, including the importance of developing a good work ethic and understanding that there is strength in unity. "Having come from a large family, he always talked about that. There's a lot of things you pray for, but two things that help me that I really and truly pray for all the time is patience and focus.

"An old lady from my church when I was a young deacon used to say to me, 'Son, think before you talk.' That's the best advice that anybody can ever give you," Wright said.

He was elected to Orangeburg County Council in 1994 and officially took office in January 1995. He was first elected chairman in 2009 and has been re-elected as chairman four times since then. He also serves as the second vice-president of the state Association of Counties.

How does he juggle it all?

"It keeps you on the go. From the family standpoint

with a wife, sometimes it can be challenging, to say the least. My grandkids say, 'Granddaddy, you work all the time.' I say, 'When you love something, then it's not work,'" Wright said.

"It's an adventure to me because it gives me a purpose to get up. It helps keeps my mind moving. I love it. I love doing what I do. So if you love it, even though you might be busy, you can do a lot better juggling it, especially when your health is right. Your body will tell you when you need to get some rest," he said.

Wright said loyalty is among the values he has tried to instill not only in his own children, but others as well.

"When all my biological grands were growing up and my kids were all over the place, when they'd call, I'd stay, babysit with them, do whatever. I love to be able to try to pass on things to them to try to be that role model that they need.

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"There are so many kids that don't have mentors when it comes to fathers, grandfathers and things of that nature. To me, that's important not only for my kids, but I talk to young people otherwise, too," Wright said.

He said because neither he nor anyone else is perfect, he stays in prayer to God for guidance.

"You have to continue to pray to ask God to keep you. ... I ask every day for guidance in this business because you make decisions sometimes and no matter what decision you make, somebody's not gonna like it, or it's gonna affect somebody differently," he said. "You try to make the best decision to satisfy the majority of the people; that's about all you can do."

He reflected back on his father's words of wisdom, particularly as it pertains to how he keeps his work and home environments on an even keel.

"Again, his thing was unity is your strength. The thing that he always said is that if you stick together and help each other, you can always go further. That's my word to council, the county and all the organizations that are connected to the county. If we can work together as a team, then we can accomplish the unknown," Wright said.

He added, "At the end of the day, we gotta see the big picture. You gotta look at what's gonna be best because all of us need each other. That's the way I was raised: Be honest, be fair, help people and have a good work ethic."

He praised the OCCOC for its efforts to spread good character within the community.

"I think it's a good thing. You can never recognize all of the people that contribute, and I know that, but I think it's a good thing to have the Community of Character in our county. ... When people are dealing with all of the issues that they deal with in everyday life, they have something different to highlight good things that people need to know about," Wright said.

"We hear enough negative things. For all of the bad that people think is going on, there's a lot of good. And as for the county itself, I always feel the best is yet to come. We have our challenges, but it's still a good day in Orangeburg County," he said.