



# Hurdling barriers

For McConnell, being  
first is nothing new

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When Timothy R. McConnell was growing up in the rural community of Shelton in Fairfield County, he understood what he needed to do to get where he wanted to be.

Last month, at age 36, McConnell achieved two major milestones in his career when he won a court-directed judgment for control of the state's only black-owned bank, Victory Savings Bank in Columbia, and became the first black to be accepted for membership in the prestigious, and exclusive, Wildewood Country Club in northeast Columbia.

Assailed at times by both white and black critics, McConnell said that since his childhood he has tried to avoid looking at goals on a black or white basis. That, he said, has allowed him to focus on and achieve the goals he has set.

Over the past 20 years, however, he has hurdled one color barrier after another in achieving a series of firsts in South Carolina. They included being among the first blacks to integrate Winnsboro High School in 1965; the first black to be elected vice president of the University of South Carolina Student Government Association and president of its student senate; the first black to pass the grueling Certified Public Accountant's exam in South Carolina; and subsequently, the first black to set up his own CPA firm in the state.

Despite a self-professed desire to maintain a low profile, his activities, both in the community and in the private sector, have often brought him into the public eye, most recently with the private clubs issue in Columbia and

s determination to control Victory Savings Bank.

The second youngest of seven children of Virgil R. and Annie McConnell, the young CPA grew up in a family where he said there was an entrepreneurial spirit. His father was a carpenter who also owned 100 acres that the family farmed "seriously," and had McConnell doing everything from picking cotton to collecting eggs. Both his father's business and the self-sufficiency of farm life gave McConnell the experiences that would set him on his present course.

McConnell attended the all-black McCrorey-Liston School in Monticello. He said he and the other students accepted the status that was forced upon them. It was the way of life. The blacks went to one school and the whites went to another, even though it meant busing the whites 25 miles to Winnsboro High.

It was the controversial "freedom of choice" school attendance plan, before the days of totally integrated schools, that enabled McConnell to break the first barrier, attending all-white Winnsboro High as a freshman in 1965.

It was a decision few other blacks made, suspicious, if not fearful, of the treatment they would receive. McConnell received the treatment, although he looks back on those days now saying that integration probably went as smoothly as it could have. He remembers being the target one day of white students who "were just having fun" rocking the school bus he was on.

"Even after freedom of choice, only two or three blacks chose to go to Winnsboro High," he said. And he remembers being denied the opportunity to be a school bus driver because he was black.

"Those were the kinds of hurdles you had a tough time accepting," he said.

But after the first year "things worked out," McConnell said. He was able to get involved in activities, and now has a number of close white friends in Winnsboro that go back to those days.

"My choice was to get the best possible education, although my parents had some reservations about health and safety," he said. "I had some very pleasant experiences, but many weren't so pleasant.

"I look back on it as a totally different environment. It could have been a lot worse."

Even before high school, however, the groundwork for McConnell's ambitions was being laid. His fa-

ther was a contractor. And in those days most transactions were done in cash, so his father carried with him a spiral notebook to keep up with accounts. Later, his father helped found a local credit union in Shelton for blacks, which got his son involved in numbers and business.

"I was voluntarily forced to learn how the lending process worked," said McConnell, who was about 10 at the time the Community Credit Association was founded. He went on to become a member of its supervisory committee, which was involved in auditing the association's activities.

McConnell turned to accounting as a vocation after first considering careers in engineering and music.

From childhood, McConnell admits he's had a talent for singing, and while other opportunities in high school were limited, he joined the band and the choir. And he was on call to sing at weddings.

"I've been singing since I've been old enough to sing," he said.

A leg injury in the sixth grade while playing baseball prevented him from participating in sports. Instead, he said, he turned to the books and as a result, his grades were impeccable.

"I really pushed for excellence. It really made you feel good about yourself," said McConnell, who said he graduated in the top five in his high school class.

When he entered the University of South Carolina in 1969, he was ready to set the world on fire. While he found that most blacks at the Columbia campus were "anti-USC," McConnell dived into the political process, joined groups and became a campus activist. After switching majors twice in his freshman year, McConnell settled on business administration and accounting, recognizing it was through that avenue that he "could make a decent living."

"In college I was a politician," he said. He "got involved in so much" — everything from being an orientation counselor and resident hall advisor to USC Concert Choir — that he forgot about his studies.

One of his professors, however, brought him back to reality. "McConnell," he said, "you need to start looking at your cost accounting book."

"I did," McConnell said, "and in taking all that to heart I decided to go to graduate school."

Meanwhile, McConnell's student government experience virtually led him to politics' doorstep. Because of his position, he sat in on the board of trustees meetings as a student member of the board.

That involvement led to a position with Gov. John C. West's administra-

tion. Tom Jones and USC trustee Jerry Beasley while completing his undergraduate studies and during graduate school, McConnell worked as a legislative aide in the governor's office, responsible for reviewing proposed laws and appointments to boards.

"I made a lot of contacts. And it was through that process that I really learned to appreciate how the system works and how much politics touches everything we do," said McConnell.

Most of all, he said, he learned "negotiation and the power of persuasion."

"Communicate, negotiate and compromise."

In 1974, after completing graduate school, McConnell went to work for Peat Marwick Mitchell & Co. in Charlotte, realizing he needed to get both the experience and stature that came with joining a "Big Eight" accounting firm.

"By the time I finished graduate school, I knew precisely where I wanted to go and how I was going to get there."

He wanted his own firm. But first, he had to make it through the monstrous five-part CPA exam, which he completed in 1975.

After working in audit and tax areas for Peat Marwick, McConnell opened his own firm, T.R. McConnell & Co., in Columbia in December 1976.

McConnell got a rude awakening. Columbia was a very competitive accounting market, and regardless of his race, he figured out quickly that he was going to have to develop avenues of business that weren't already locked up.

The first thing he did was to set up office in the new Bankers Trust Tower to avoid the pitfall of some black-operated businesses that are labeled as second-rate because of their office location, not because of the quality of their work.

Since he wanted to concentrate on the audit area, he realized he needed to market himself beyond the black business community to generate enough volume to be successful.

"I had to realize no matter how great I was going to get, the private accounting firms had business locked up and people weren't going to change.

"The only other major area was governmental," he said. "That's what we pursued heavily."

For three years, he said, the one-person firm survived on bookkeeping and tax work. Then came "two of the biggest breaks." One came from then-Richland District One School