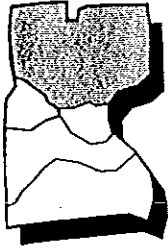


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Commemorating black legislator, businessman

By JANE ELLEN DEE
Courant Correspondent



Trude Mero calls herself a kitchen person, preferring to work at her kitchen table in a room lit warmly by sunlight.

Recently, Mero settled at the table to work

on a volunteer project — tracing the history of her church, Faith Congregational on Main Street in Hartford.

Over the years, Mero's Tower Avenue home has been filled with the voices of people working around tables. In the 1960s, those voices included some of the city's leading politicians.

One voice was that of her husband, Wilfred X. "Spike" Johnson, the first African-American to win election to the state's General Assembly. He died of cancer in 1972.



■ Johnson

In recognition of Johnson's leadership in the city's black community, his and Mero's Tower Avenue home was placed on the National Register of Historic Places last summer.

Like the Boce Barlow Jr. house on Canterbury Street, the Johnson house — built in 1928 — was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places by the Connecticut Historical Commission in order to increase the listings on the National Register of houses identified with women's history and black history.

The house, decorated with family heirlooms and newer furniture, is where the couple raised five children. "You purchase things and they're beautiful, and you keep them," Mero said.

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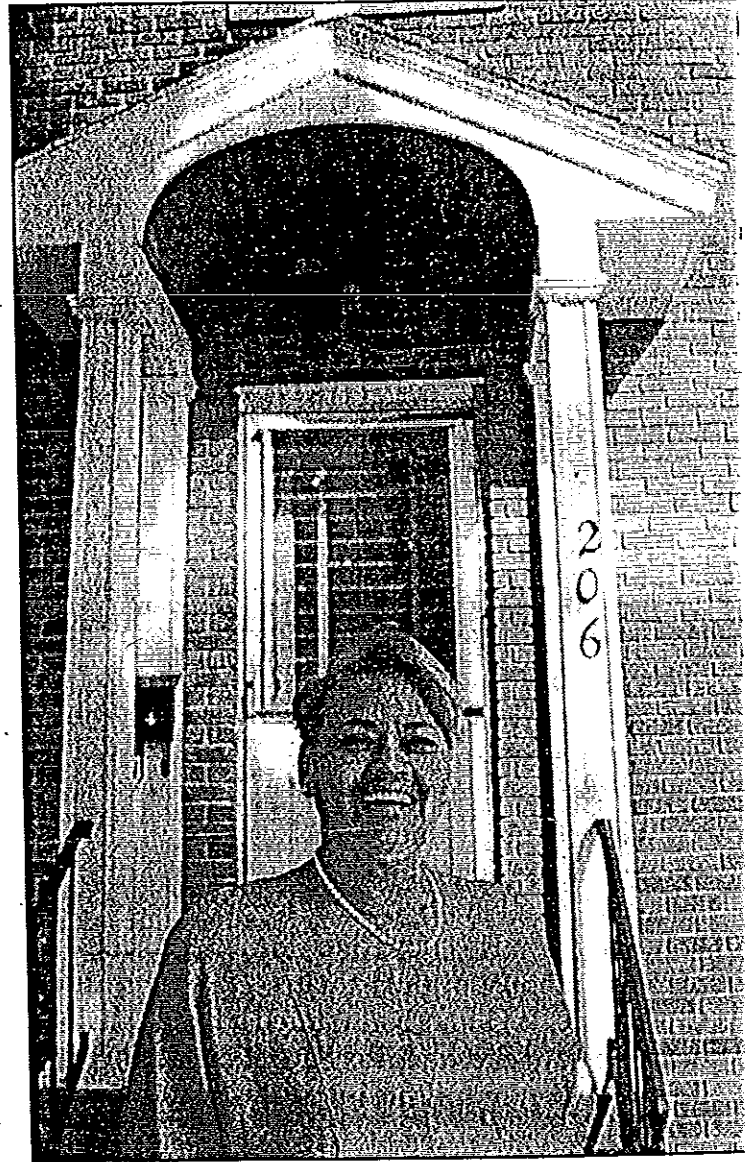
Mero and Johnson bought the house in 1964 from a black doctor and his wife. At the time, the Johnson family was living in a three-story house on Cleveland Avenue. Mero admired the large, brick Tower Avenue home, which she had often passed while walking with her children. When the doctor's family moved, they sold the house to the Johnsons.

By then, Spike Johnson was serving as a state representative. He also was a successful businessman, operating a liquor store on Barbour Street known as Spike's Spirit Shoppe, and, with his brother Howard, a haberdashery called Johnson's Men's Furnishings on Main Street.

Johnson started in politics in 1946, campaigning in his neighborhood for Democratic Party candidates. In 1953 and 1955, he ran unsuccessfully as an independent candidate for city council. One of his mentors was Barlow. "Boce and Spike were real . . ." Mero said, her voice trailing off. "They were ahead of their time."

Another political ally of Johnson's was William E. Curry Sr., a close friend from his youth. Both grew up in the city's North End. Curry is the father of Bill Curry, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate who was defeated in November by Republican John G. Rowland.

Johnson, Curry, U.S. Congressman Emilio Q. "Mim" Daddario and Hartford's Democratic registrar of voters, Nicholas G. Bonadies, met frequently at one another's homes to hash out political strategy. Mero said she has pictures of them. "They were all here," she said. This ethnic political coalition propelled Johnson to victory in the 1958 citywide elec-



Marc Yves Regis / The Hartford Courant

■ Trude Mero outside her Tower Avenue home in Hartford, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places last summer in recognition of the work of her husband, Wilfred X. "Spike" Johnson who died in 1972. He was the first African-American elected to the General Assembly.

tion for the General Assembly.

But Mero said another person was behind the political ambitions of both Johnson and Barlow. She credits Mary Parkman Watson, the first black member of the Dem-

ocratic State Central Committee with teaching them how to organize.

"[Watson] was an influential person and knew personal downtown," Barlow said.