

The Legacy of Leland

By Jacob N. Wagner

Mickey Leland. Houstonians with traveling experience will recognize the name of the international terminal at George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH). Houston residents familiar with downtown will recall the name on the federal building. Alumni from the University of Houston or Texas Southern University will also know the name. Unfortunately many Houston residents, especially those who are new to the city or too young to remember him, will recognize Mickey Leland's name but lack a thorough understanding of the former Houston lawmaker's contributions. Leland dedicated his political career to caring for his fellow man at home and abroad, demonstrating the importance of helping those in need. In the process, he left a legacy of humanitarianism that remains a model for us today.

The Leland story began in Lubbock, Texas, where Mickey was born on November 27, 1944. When he was three his father left the family, and afterward the two had little contact. At seven, Mickey received a bicycle from his father, a gift that represented one of the few interactions the two had before his father died when Mickey was twenty-one years old.¹ Mickey, his mother Alice Rains, and younger brother Gaston moved to Houston's Fifth Ward in the late 1940s. His mother worked in a drugstore until she completed her bachelor's degree and became a school teacher, setting an example for her sons.²

Mickey faced adversity growing up that went beyond his family circumstances. With a very light complexion and light-colored eyes, he found himself between two races—too dark to be white but too light to be black. Other children constantly made fun of him. Fifth Ward resident and childhood friend Robert E. “Bobbie” Lee III remarked that Mickey never fought back against the bullies. Once when a group of boys chased Mickey near Atherton Elementary, Lee, who was a student cross-

ing guard at the school, decided to take matters into his own hands. He snatched one of the boys chasing Mickey and beat him up and then walked Mickey home. From that day forward, the two remained friends.³

Understanding Mickey Leland's legacy is “almost like putting together pieces of a puzzle, and new pieces come up all the time.”

—Alison Leland

and inferior facilities because black schools did not receive the same level of funding as white schools. Since Mickey attended schools made up primarily of African American and Hispanic students, the school district did not give them much attention.⁴

Despite these obstacles, Mickey excelled in school and sports. In 1964, he graduated from Phillis Wheatley High School in the top ten percent of his class. Although he shined in all of the sports in which he participated, his greatest

Even though the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision declared school segregation unconstitutional, Houston schools still had not desegregated by the early 1960s. Mickey and other African American students had to deal with outdated textbooks and inferior facilities because black schools did not receive the same level of funding as white schools. Since Mickey attended schools made up primarily of African American and Hispanic students, the school district did not give them much attention.⁴

success came in football, and the University of Southern California (USC) offered him a football scholarship. Fortunately for Houston, his mother insisted he stay in town and focus on education instead.⁵

Mickey saw this as disappointing at the time. Alison Leland, Mickey's wife and a University of Houston political science professor, recalls that he felt that his life was different than it might have been had he pursued football at USC. After graduating from Wheatley, Mickey attended Texas Southern University (TSU), where he graduated with a bachelor of science degree in pharmacy in 1970.⁶

Mickey attended TSU at the height of the tumultuous sixties and found himself a vocal leader in the local civil rights movement. This initial involvement blossomed after Mickey graduated from TSU. He organized and led the Black Citizens Action Teams, or Black Cats, which protested against police brutality.⁷



Mickey Leland in Ethiopia in 1987. His shirt reads “Houston Proud” in Hebrew.

All photos courtesy of the George Thomas “Mickey” Leland Collection, Mickey Leland Center for Environment, Justice and Sustainability, Texas Southern University, Houston, Texas, unless otherwise noted.



Alice Rains with her son Mickey at a press conference, 1979.

At the same time, Mickey used his knowledge of medicine and health to help his community. When he found the people in his neighborhood lacked proper healthcare, Mickey set up an outreach program providing “door-to-door” visits in low-income areas, informing residents about their medical care options and giving them a preliminary health screening, free of charge.⁸ This effort represents one of Leland’s first and most charitable humanitarian actions.

Growing up in a home where his mother struggled to provide for the family motivated Mickey to ensure the poor received care. Citing the importance of good health to a person’s well-being, Leland urged Houston health officials to create community clinics. He used his status in the Black Cats to push for other reform measures to ensure availability of medical options for the less fortunate. In the Fifth Ward Leland helped create the Jensen Medical Referral Service, a free community health clinic. Mickey saw it as “deplorable that we are the wealthiest country in the world, and yet we are experiencing growing discrepancies in the well-being of our own citizens.”⁹ In short, as an adult representing his community, he attempted to compensate for what he lacked as a child.

Leland’s involvement in the city propelled him onto the political stage. John and Dominique de Menil, the philanthropic French immigrants and heirs to the Schlumberger fortune, were impressed by Mickey from the moment they met. They believed in him and gave him an opportunity to address the causes he thought were important. The de Menils funded Mickey’s campaign for the Texas House of Representatives in 1972, when he was one of five minority candidates running for seats. By that time Texas representatives and senators were being elected from single-member districts, which improved the chances of electing minority candidates. Leland’s groundbreaking victory placed him among the first African American state representatives elected in Texas since Reconstruction.¹⁰ The de Menils’

generosity became the catalyst for Mickey to showcase his potential and, perhaps most importantly, to travel outside of Texas for the first time in his life.

At first Leland stuck out like a sore thumb in Austin. He sported an Afro and wore a dashiki, a traditional, ornate African top. In the Texas legislature, this was seen as flamboyant and shocked more conservative members, particularly those from rural districts, who had served with few minority colleagues. After some time, however, Leland began wearing more traditional apparel.¹¹

Mickey “burst onto the scene with two close friends from Houston, Craig Washington, who was his immediate successor to Congress, and Ben Reyes, who went on to be a Houston City Council member,” Alison points out. While serving the 88th District in Houston, Mickey became a “champion of healthcare rights for the poor” and pushed for legislation that allowed doctors to prescribe generic drugs. As a U.S. Congressman during the 1979 oil crisis, he pointed out that the poor faced tough choices between spending money on heating fuel or food. Mickey insisted, “We must ensure that millions of Americans will not have to compromise their health and well-being so that they can pay their utility and fuel bills.” Americans should never have to face the “dismal choice of ‘food or fuel,’” he stated. In addition, Mickey became a strong force for state employment opportunities for minorities, prison reform, as well as occupational and industrial safety.¹² By ensuring that the poor had access to affordable prescription drugs and by promoting minority hiring practices, Leland served as an advocate that the underprivileged lacked.



Mickey Leland and Dominique de Menil at the Rice Museum opening of the Some American History exhibition, 1971.

Photo courtesy of the Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston.
Photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston.

After two more terms, Leland ascended the political ladder. When Barbara Jordan, the representative for Houston’s U.S. 18th Congressional District, retired from politics in 1978, Leland, confident after his successes in the Texas House of Representatives, ran and won the seat.

Despite his new title as Congressman Leland, Mickey



Alison and Mickey Leland at the Congressional Black Caucus Weekend, 1986.

remained devoted to the less fortunate. He had an innate ability to reach out to and gain support for his issues from unlikely sources. For example, he reunited Cuban families by visiting his friend Fidel Castro and bringing the separated family member back to the states with him. He met with Pope John Paul II to establish a way to bring food to those in need in Africa. He pushed to fund incremental vitamin A for Third World countries to help reduce child mortality. Regarding his efforts abroad, Mickey explained, “The moral stature of the United States as a world leader is based to a great extent on our generous humanitarian response to people in need.”¹³ Mickey took this sentiment to heart as he worked for others.

Mickey’s push to provide healthcare, food assistance, housing, and education to the poor met with some resistance, and he had to fight against policies that exacerbated the position of people below the poverty line. Mickey reminded his fellow lawmakers, “It is dangerous to develop public policy in isolation from the people those policies will affect.”¹⁴

He started by introducing the Homeless Persons Survival Act, “a comprehensive bill” that provided what was “needed over five years.” It included “nine small bills” that “covered physical and mental health, food assistance, housing, [and] education of homeless children,” and addressed “Social Security and Veterans issues.” The downfall of the Homeless Persons Survival Act was the bill’s cost, and it failed to pass. Nevertheless, he remained convinced that “proposed Federal legislation [was] vital to assure these children the education to help them escape from poverty.”¹⁵

The following year Mickey worked with other lawmakers to pass the Stewart B. McKinney Emergency Assistance for the Homeless Act. Among the campaign’s events was the Grate American Sleep Out, where Mickey and other congressmen “experienced sleeping on the cold streets of Washington, D.C., in early March for one night.” These actions helped pass the McKinney Act and gave Mickey a more personal experience with Americans living in poverty.

He described his experience as “only a bare inkling of what homeless people endure,” and it motivated him to continue fighting for the poor, saying that he was “haunted by their invisibility, their loneliness.”¹⁶

During Mickey’s second term as a U.S. congressman, he met Alison Clark Walton. She was in the first month of her first semester at Georgetown Law School when Mickey came to a reception she attended on Capitol Hill. Alison had heard his name but knew nothing else about him. Although she had no plans to speak to Mickey, her friends insisted she approach him about an internship. From that first meeting on, she recalled he was incredibly charming and welcoming.¹⁷

On their first date, the two attended a dinner at Al Gore’s home. Alison quickly went from a law student to a congressman’s girlfriend, drastically changing her schedule. She recalled a typical week included “[my] tax law study group on Monday, dinner at Senator somebody’s house on Tuesday, my study group on Wednesday, the White House on Thursday. It was crazy.” She soon found herself friends with many prominent people in Washington. After seeing each other for a year, Mickey and Alison married in 1983.¹⁸

Three years later, the Lelands welcomed their first son, Jarrett David. In the short time that Mickey had with Jarrett, Alison remembers him as an incredible father—the kind of father that he never had.¹⁹ This pattern of compensating for the things he lacked as a child was something that made Mickey Leland a remarkable man.

As Mickey and Alison began their life together, split between Houston and Washington, she noticed how many people in both cities knew Mickey and approached him as a friend. Everyday people and children from neighborhoods near where the couple lived recognized Congressman Leland with ease. This astonished Alison who had a com-



Mickey Leland and son Jarrett voting on Super Tuesday, 1988.



Mickey Leland speaking, with Gaston Leland and Rev. Bill Lawson (left) and unknown others in front of Houston City Hall at a rally for affirmative action, 1980.

completely different experience with politics in Atlanta and Washington, D.C.

The Lelands lived in a completely different era in Washington than that experienced by politicians today. In the 1980s, congressmen still moved their families to D.C., where Republicans and Democrats lived in the same neighborhoods. They carpooled together, their children attended the same schools, they socialized at the same clubs, and their children and spouses became friends. As a result, the political boundary lines were less stark. Alison Leland notes that it was more difficult to demonize opposing parties when they were your friends and neighbors.²⁰

Mickey forged relationships with politicians on both sides of the aisle. Many of his conservative colleagues in the House and in Washington found a friend in him, despite their best efforts to dislike him. They looked past differences in ideals and saw a good man who believed in helping others. These relationships were numerous and meaningful and included even the nation's highest-ranking Republican, President Ronald Reagan.

Mickey's success in politics came from his ability to transition seamlessly between the poor and the well-to-do. He had a connection with the poor and identified with them from personal experience. Yet he also won over people like the de Menils with his charming, welcoming persona.

Mickey used his influence as a House member for his most selfless work in traveling abroad to parts of the world where the poor remained unassisted. In discussing the success of federal funding, Leland noted that "the House Select Committee on Hunger has supported specific earmarks with humanitarian goals and found them to be effective."²¹ Specifically, Mickey focused on Africa with his most influential trip being to the Sudan. The refugees he encountered there motivated him to focus his efforts on ending the region's food crisis. He never wanted anyone to go hungry, at home or abroad, saying that he "grew up on

a Christian ethic which says we are supposed to help the least of our brothers."²² Alison Leland recalls how Mickey always felt guilty during trips to the grocery store after he returned from Africa because he compared the desolation there to the abundance that he found here.

Not everyone appreciated Leland's humanitarian work abroad. During one re-election campaign, he ran against a school board member who accused him of being out of touch with his home district because he had not put all of his efforts into Texas and Houston. He responded, "[I am] as much a citizen of the world as I am of my country."²³ He reminded people that during con-

gressional recesses, he did not take a family vacation but rather made trips to the most desolate locations to help people there. U.S. abundance made him feel "compelled to help," and he truly believed that "if you save one life, you save the whole world."²⁴

In August 1989, Mickey traveled to Ethiopia on his sixth trip to Africa. This humanitarian mission had a roster that included some of Washington's most prominent names today. Al Gore and Nancy Pelosi had both wanted to come on the trip but circumstances kept them away. Current Texas state senator Rodney Ellis was lined up to go, but someone else was selected to go in his place.

Sadly, Leland's plane with sixteen aboard crashed into a mountainside in the rough terrain of Ethiopia. No one sur-



Mickey Leland (center) assisting Ethiopian Jews constructing a building, 1987.



Mickey Leland with El Franco Lee and students visiting the Capitol from Forest Brook High School and the Contemporary Learning Center in Houston.

vived. Alison recalls the time between when Mickey was first reported missing and when he was found as one of the most tense times in her life. Reporters camped outside her home, and she received many calls from high-ranking officials. As if that were not enough, she had learned that she was pregnant with twins just four days before Mickey passed away. Nevertheless, when searchers finally found the plane a week later, she felt some relief because it left no questions about what had happened to him.²⁵

The *Los Angeles Times* reported: “Also aboard the plane were Hugh Anderson Johnson Jr. and Patrice Yvonne Johnson, both aides to Leland (who were not related); Joyce Francine Williams, an aide to Rep. Ronald V. Dellums (D-Berkeley), and an expert on child nutrition; Y. Ivan Tillen, a New York businessman and friend of Leland’s; Robert Woods, a political and economic officer at the American Embassy in Addis Ababa; Gladys Gilbert, a special projects officer for the mission of the U.S. Agency for International Development attached to the embassy; Thomas Worrick, the acting AID representative in Ethiopia, and Worrick’s wife, Roberta. Also on board were Debebe Agonofer, an Ethiopian agricultural economist with the AID mission, and six other Ethiopians, including the plane’s crew of three.”²⁶

Mickey Leland left an incredible legacy of humanitarianism during his short time in politics. He always represented those who were underrepresented because, at his roots, he was one of them. He advocated for the poor, the young, the

old, and the sick from the local to global level. He went on goodwill missions to nations where no one else had dared to go, he visited intimidating dictators and leaders, and he befriended the staunchest conservatives and inspired in them a desire to help others.²⁷

Alison remarked in our interview that she is reminded of Mickey constantly. While that is not surprising, it is unusual that she manages to discover things she did not know about her husband. She explains, “Over time, I still learn new things about him. I’ll still have someone share with me a story, or a time they spent, or something they worked on, or something he did, and so, I think I’ve been continuously learning things about him.”²⁸ She frequently has people tell her what an impact Mickey had on them.

Today, in many ways, Mickey is still alive. He established internships that allow local high school students to travel to Israel and others that send University of Houston students to Washington, D.C. In addition to local buildings named in his honor, Ethiopia has an orphanage and a university named for him, and TSU’s Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs honors these two Fifth Ward visionaries. Downtown Houston’s Mickey Leland Federal Building is undergoing a renovation that includes a stunning all-glass exterior. The Leland International Terminal at IAH, which now serves four times as many passengers as it did originally, will be replaced in the near future with a 780,000-square-foot facility to accommodate more travelers and airlines. The Houston Independent School District recently renamed its Young Men’s College Preparatory Academy the Mickey Leland College Preparatory Academy and has plans to build a new facility to accommodate 900 to 1,000 students.²⁹

Many politicians, at the highest level, still recognize Mickey’s contributions as well. When Alison Leland introduced herself to President Barack Obama in their one meeting, he responded, “Leland...he was inspirational.”³⁰

Alison shared that she always felt as if Mickey was in a hurry. He tried to accomplish everything possible and make life easier for others. Hurried was his life, and hurried was his death, coming at age forty-four. Alison found herself a widow at thirty, suddenly without the life she was accustomed to or the future she anticipated for her family. Despite this, she feels as if Mickey is still by her side in spirit. For her, as well as for those who knew him or know of him, his legacy is like a puzzle: we don’t know everything, but we see the big picture, and it is incredible.

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The Mickey Leland Center for Environmental Justice and Sustainability administers the Mickey Leland Archives, a collection of unpublished papers, artifacts, and audio visual materials. The archives (www.lelandcenter.org) are located at 3100 Cleburne in the TSU Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs, Room 105. The Reading Room is open weekdays 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and by appointment. Contact archivesmlc@tsu.edu or 713-313-7370.