

Someone San Diego Should Know: Cecil Steppe

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Cecil Steppe was the county's director of social services. He has remained active in the community since his retirement in 1999.

Cecil Steppe has held key leadership positions, received many awards and helped shape San Diego. His success, however, did not come easy. It was achieved through a "can-do" attitude he learned early in life.

His mother was a trained teacher, but San Diego would not hire Black teachers. So, she became a domestic worker to support the family.

"I knew how hard she worked," he said. "She motivated me. I always wanted to make her proud."

Steppe never met his father.

However, he had plenty of mentors. Merchants along Imperial Avenue taught Steppe basics of their trades. Church members helped instill religious values. And his mother and family members encouraged him and pushed that positive "can-do" attitude.

Steppe said he believes these values helped guide him toward a constructive path that included childhood friends such as Earl Gilliam, who became San Diego's first Black judge, and away from negative behavior in the community.

Like many during the 1940s and 1950s, Steppe feared visiting some neighborhoods because of stories about Black people being assaulted. "As a Black person, I didn't want to be caught in La Jolla after dark," he said.

During that era there were no Black police officers or teachers in San Diego. Steppe's aunt founded the Women's Civic League that fought to remove such racial barriers, and his mother was a member.

"After a lot of struggles and heartaches, they were able to get the first Black teacher in San Diego," Steppe said, noting they also helped bring in the first Black police officer.

"My aunt requested young people in the neighborhood attend their

meetings. We learned to push hard for what you want. Don't beg. Earn it."

There is a banner on Market Street today celebrating Black history and honoring Steppe's aunt, Rebecca Craft.

After graduating high school in 1951 and four years in the Air Force, Steppe earned a bachelor's in sociology from California Western University. It took him eight years, as he worked full-time during college in a bus company's mechanical unit, sometimes working until 1 a.m.

In 1964, San Diego County hired him. He climbed the ladder to leadership positions over 35 years. He began as a junior probation officer, supervising criminals on probation, and worked his way up to chief probation officer in 1982.

By 1992 he was director of social services, where he oversaw a \$900 million budget and supervised 3,800 employees, a position he held until his retirement in 1999.

With each position, Steppe's "can-do" attitude helped him advance and foster changes.

While with the Probation Department, he blended "no nonsense" oversight of criminals on probation with encouragement that they can change. Among other things, he created the Informal Supervision Unit, with five officers and 30 volunteers, hoping to avoid court involvement by steering youth away from misbehavior and helping adults obtain employment.

The unit inspired similar programs elsewhere.

While leading the Social Services Department, Steppe advocated locally and statewide for welfare reform to strengthen employment and training programs and move welfare recipients to self-sufficiency.

Since retirement he has served on or chaired many boards of directors,

including Save our Children, Reading Legacies, Gompers Preparatory Academy (a partnership with UCSD), and San Diego Urban League.

He received numerous awards, such as designation as a top African-American role model and Rotary Clubs "Mr. San Diego."

Steppe and his wife, Evelyn, whom he met in high school, were married 59 years. She died in 2015. He has five adult children, 12 grandchildren and nine great grandchildren, all of whom Steppe says have the "can-do" attitude.

Steppe grew up on Imperial Avenue, valuing his neighborhood and avoiding negativity around him, but fearing certain other neighborhoods. Today, he is an icon who has helped shape San Diego.

About this series

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Someone San Diego Should Know is a column written by members of the U-T's Community Advisory Board about local people who are interesting and noteworthy because of their experiences, achievements, creativity or credentials.