Community Invited to Cooke’s Birthday and Retirement ‘BBQ & Blues’

By Princella Tobias  
Spirit Correspondent

For Wilce Cooke, he always wants to give back, and that is exactly what he’ll be doing on Saturday, June 18 at Babe’s Bar & Restaurant, 765 Riverview Drive, in Benton Harbor (next to the U.S. Post Office). Cooke’s “Blues & BBQ” Bash is free and open to the community that he loves. There will be free food from Dialos’ Cafe and entertainment by D.J. Big Will.

Any local entertainer who wants to come and show their love to Cooke, including singers, musicians, and poetry readers, is welcome to take the stage, as well. “I would not miss this for the world. Mayor Cooke has been good to me and a lot of other people in his community,” states Johnny Edwards, local singer, sensation and musician. Headlining the event will be B.B. King’s daughter, Shirley King, known as “The Daughter of the Blues.” “When I received the call to come, I could not resist. I can still remember him opening his home to me years ago, when I preformed in Benton Harbor. I will not be able to bring a band, but I will Rock the House and sing to my tracks. I am not merely a singer, I am a performer, and I hope Mayor Cooke has a little energy left for me,” King laughs.

“‘I’m Ready To Rock
Benton Harbor...’”
--King, speaking of her show for Cooke on Saturday, June 18 at Cooke’s Bash

This will be a great community event, Lue Buchana offered to decorate the venue, and Geraldine Morris serves as the co-chair of the committee along with myself. I am excited. We also thank WVBH 105.3 FM for helping us spread the word, LaShunn “Chief Dialo” Harper for his great food, Babe’s Lounge for the venue, George Moon for helping us pass out flyers when he wasn’t feeling well, the people who took the time to send statements on Cooke on page 5 and 6, and the list goes on. Finally, we have an opportunity to do something for Mayor Cooke. Please come out and join us. From City Hall to the Emergency Room, come and show your love to Cooke as he celebrates his birthday, which is officially June 18, and his pending retirement from Lakeland after 45-plus years.
W ilce L Cooke has spent his lifetime serving others — whether in Lakeland Hospital emergency room, where he’s spent 47 years, or as mayor of his beloved city, Benton Harbor, which he led from 1982-89 and in 2004-11. Now, Cooke is starting a new chapter in life — as he retires from the emergency room, and gears up for the next one with the Wilce L Cooke Foundation.

The Foundation, as Cooke explains, will promote one cause above all others — raising scholarship money for city residents who want to pursue healthcare careers, as he did so long ago. “Today, in any part of the state, a lot of the sustainable jobs are in the healthcare profession,” Cooke said. “When I started 47 years ago, I was the only male nurse in Southwest Michigan. Now we have seven or eight in the emergency room alone.”

Cooke will close out his 47-year career at 7 p.m. on Saturday, with a “Blues & BBQ” Retirement and Birthday Bash at Babe’s Lounge & Restaurant, 765 Riverview Drive, Benton Harbor. With that milestone just around the corner, Cooke spent a few minutes Monday, reflecting on its meaning, and what he’s done to improve the city he loves, among other topics. The highlights follow below.

Benton Spirit: Why did you decide to retire now?

Wilce Cooke: Because the timing is perfect. Medicine has evolved over the years. It’s really high-tech, and I’m impressed with the way things are. Everything is computerized. You don’t have to write anything — you can just go into the computer, and do it. We have Pyxis, a computerized medication dispensing machine. There’s not a lot of mistakes being made, there’s more accountability, and it’s easier to substantiate any spoilage, waste, or inside discrepancies.

Benton Spirit: What other factors went into your decision?

Wilce Cooke: We’ve got younger people coming into play. I’m three times the senior of most of the young nurses, and most of the doctors. It’s a young person’s game now.

Benton Spirit: What other things do you anticipate doing, once your retirement becomes official?

Wilce Cooke: I don’t know. Maybe I’ll get involved in the political arena in the city of Benton Harbor — I don’t know about running for mayor, but maybe run for something else. Right now, I think we have a good mayor. I think the city is in decent hands at the present time. They’re going to need all the assistance they can muster, so we’re going to lend our support to them.

Benton Spirit: So when you look back on your life and career, what things do you feel most proud of, where you feel, “I really made a mark?”

Wilce Cooke

Wilce Cooke is my best friend. I have worked with him for over 40 years. He is just a kind and decent guy. He is like a brother—compassionate and caring, just a really nice guy.

--Dorothy Moon, former medical professional
Benton Harbor, MI

Wilce Cooke was one of the first nurses I became acquainted with as soon as I started working for Mercy Hospital in 1979. He has been an invaluable colleague and friend ever since. His dedication to his patients shows with a 20 treats. Like generals, old nurses don’t die, they just fade away. I will truly miss working with my friend, however, we can continue to fight the fight for healthcare equity in our community.

--Lynn S. Gray, MD, MPH

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Wilce Cooke is a giant of our community. I consider him a political father and mentor, and I certainly would not be where I am politically today, were it not for his leadership, his guidance, and his support for me in politics. I’m grateful, humbled, and I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Thank you, Mayor Cooke, for his 45 years plus, with Lakeland Medical Center — but most near and dear to my heart, his three terms as mayor of the city of Benton Harbor.”

--Marcus Muhammad, Mayor
City of Benton Harbor

On behalf of the entire Lakeland family I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Wilce L. Cooke for his 45 years of dedicated service. Not only has Wilce touched the hearts and lives of countless patients throughout southwest Michigan, he has also provided exemplary nursing services to my own family when emergency care was required. He is a true model of compassion and professionalism in action. I am confident that he will continue to impact the lives of future healthcare professionals through his work with the Wilce L. Cooke Foundation.

--Loren B. Hamel, resident and CEO
Lakeland Health
Wilce Cooke: I think I made a mark in healthcare. We've helped a lot of people over the 47 years I've been a nurse, and I think we made a mark in the political arena, in the city of Benton Harbor. I helped my hometown progress. We know that there is a lot more that needs to be done -- and you have to be part of the solution, or part of the problem. You can't sit back on your laurels, and not participate. When I look back, I am so pleased that I participated and I will continue.

Benton Spirit: So you have people that come back and thank you for things you've done?

Wilce Cooke: Oh, yeah. People have always come back and told me: “Man, you helped save my life.” “You helped my son, my daughter.” They always tell me that. A lot of people come back and say, “You made a mark. When are you going to go back, and take your rightful position as mayor of Benton Harbor?” I’ve said, “I don’t know about that.”

People remember you. I like always tell people, “After you expire, there are two things you leave behind. You leave a reputation, good, bad or indifferent. And the other is when you have children -- you leave little miniatures of yourself behind.”

Benton Spirit: What other things do you see the Foundation doing, besides helping raise that scholarship money?

Wilce Cooke: Well, that's the number one priority. I've been a nurse for so many years, we thought it would only be fitting to bring others in behind us, and lift others up. It's paramount.

Besides the scholarships, we want the foundation to uplift and help Benton Harbor and its citizens, with an emphasis on health, youth, and senior citizens.

Benton Spirit: In terms of Berrien County, what are some of the biggest strides that it’s made, as you look back on those 47 years?

Wilce Cooke: In healthcare, when you think about it -- I came out of Mercy Hospital, in Benton Harbor. They started open heart surgery. They started the kidney dialysis program. They started the oncology program, for treating cancer. This was all done at the former Mercy Center. Now they are using robotics to do a lot of things. It just shows that healthcare has come a long way.

Benton Spirit: And what about on the racial and social side?

Wilce Cooke: Well, I think that healthcare has helped bridge the gap in the racism problem in Southwest Michigan. I think people understand, for example, that when they come to the emergency room, it’s not gonna be just them -- it's gonna be a mixed crowd with, for example, Caucasian Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

And I think Dr. (Loren) Hamel, the CEO of the hospital, is open-minded. He's the best public relations tool the hospital’s ever had, and he understands that public relations is everything.

there are still inequalities and injustices in our community. One important step we all can do is not live with others on—we still need to educate people in regards to this area. And, start listening with more than our ears, but with our hearts too.

We are all God's children and should all be respected and treated fairly, regardless of race, gender, or circumstances.

Benton Spirit: What are your thoughts on the passing of (former heavyweight boxing champion) Muhammad Ali, who had a local presence in Berrien Springs, for so many years?

Wilce Cooke: With him having Parkinson's disease, it's a travesty an individual of his stature and physical presence could deteriorate to the state that he finally found himself in -- but that was probably due to the blows he sustained in the boxing ring. But he was “The Greatest.” He made a statement, he could back it up, and he did -- in the ring and outside of the ring. He stood on principle and stood strong. His life embodied many of the principles we try to instill in our youth today--strong work ethics, preparation

Benton Spirit: And lastly, what keeps your spirit alive?

Wilce Cooke: The city that I was born and raised in. I have an affinity for the city of Benton Harbor. It's the place of my birth, and I think that anyone worth their salt would always try and improve the quality of life of those in their community, to help bring them up to par, and to inspire them to carry on even further.

I really believe that, and I have tried to do that. I tried to make the citizens of Benton Harbor proud that I was their mayor, and proud that I was their nurse -- so they would feel that they have someone that they can rely on.

Wilce Cooke is pictured (center) with former U.S. presidents Gerald Ford (left) and Ronald Reagan (right), back in the day.

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Community Quotes About Wilce Cooke

“I would first wish my mayor a Happy Birthday! Wilce and I share the same zodiac sign Gemini. As for his retirement, I want him back full-time, because he has a lot of wisdom and knowledge to share and offer. We as a community, have to embrace the wisdom and knowledge that seniors have to offer. We need to grab hold to our seniors and embrace their wisdom because the city needs it. Wilce Cooke is one of the best and we wish him health and prosperity.”
--Juanita Henry, City of Benton Harbor Commissioner, 3rd Ward

“Wilce Cooke is indeed a long time respected community leader here in Benton Harbor whose advice I have long sought on a wide variety of issues important to us. He has truly made a positive difference for our community – that is for sure. I would like to join the many others in thanking him for his service and wishing him the very best of luck on all of his future endeavors.”
--Congressman Fred Upton, Sixth Congressional District

“I have known Wilce Cooke for most of my teen life and adult life as well. We have been neighbors since 1998, so I have basically known him my whole life. Wilce Cooke is basically a living legend here in Benton Harbor. He is a wonderful nurse in the emergency room at Lakeland and at Mercy Hospital. He knows how to make patients feel comfortable and respected. He served with a serving heart and he is a good person to know. My son is now following in his footsteps by taking a career in the medical field.”
--Ron Singleton, City of Benton Harbor, Commissioner at Large

“He has really served our community all down through the years, being mayor, being all kinds of advocate – he is really, really a mentor for everybody. Everybody knows him. So, come out. Please, let’s celebrate this celebration! I’ve been the mayor since I’ve been a resident of Benton Harbor for 45, 50 years.”
--Geraldine Morris, Benton Harbor

“Wilce Cooke has been a longstanding pillar of pragmatic leadership in Benton Harbor and for the region. He has always given his heart and soul to this community, taking head on the realities the city faced with unabashed honesty that led to practical solutions while still inspiring others with his always optimistic view for our future. In good times and bad, Wilce Cooke has been a force in our area. I admired his toughness when needed and his always warm personality and genuine caring for others.”
--D. Jeffrey Noel, Corporate Vice President Communications & Public Affairs, Whirlpool Corporation

“It’s an honor to have Wilce Cooke’s birthday and retirement party here at Babe’s. I know it would mean a lot to my father (who passed) and also my family. Wilce Cooke is a man of strong character and he is a role model to the community. - I just want to thank Wilce Cooke for being kind to my family and to being a great person.”
--Jim Couvelis, Owner of Babe’s Bar & Restaurant

“Wilce Cooke has 45 plus years at the Lakeland Hospital and as a nurse he has touched almost every baby in the County. If you can trust him to put a needle in your baby, you can most certainly trust him with everything else. He was a good nurse and he was a great mayor!”
--George Moon, Benton Harbor

“Wilce was a great man. I cannot think of anything negative about this man. I want to wish him a Happy Birthday and thank him for serving us at Lakeland for as many years as he did.”
--James Whitelow Heating Service, Benton Harbor

“Mayor Cooke, Happy Birthday! It’s been a long road and he is just another small giant whose shoulders I stand on as I continue the fight he started in the progressive of bringing Our Beloved Benton Harbor back to its greatness.”
--MaryAlice Adams, Commissioner-at-Large, City of Benton Harbor
“I Let Everything Roll”: Shirley King, “Daughter Of The Blues,” Ready To Rock Benton Harbor at Booke’s Bash

By Ralph Heibutzki
Spirit Correspondent

Slowly down just isn’t in Shirley King’s nature. She spent years tearing up one stage after another – first, as a professional dancer for 21 years, and then, singing the blues, which she’s been doing since 1989. On Saturday, June 18, the daughter of late blues guitarist B.B. King will bring her high energy to Benton Harbor to honor and celebrate the birthday and retirement of Wilco L. Cooke, during his “BB & Blues Birthday & Retirement Bash” at Babe’s Restaurant & Lounge, at 7 p.m.

“I just returned from performing overseas, and now, I am heading to Benton Harbor to help honor a man who allowed me to stay at his home over 10 years ago, when I performed for a community festival in Benton Harbor. This man has served as mayor and for over 45 years in the medical field helping people, something that is very dear to me now as I use my artistry to help sick people through Oak Street,” states King.

Oak Street Health operates a network of 17 primary care clinics for Medicare patients (65 and older) throughout Chicago and Indiana – and is adding more in Michigan and Indiana, thanks to Shirley’s work on their behalf. “Seniors get sick, just from not being attended. They have a primary care doctor that takes care of all that – that’s really their mission, is to keep seniors well, and happy, and out of the hospital,” Shirley explains. “It’s great for seniors.”

Shirley has also actively participated in blues education programs, something that she considers essential in keeping the music alive for future generations.

“That was such a great need of my dad, to see young people educated about the blues, and not think the negative. It’s made me feel good inside to know that, somewhere along the line, I would encourage people to get their kids involved in music,” Shirley asserts. “It would mean so much to me; to save somebody with music.”

Benton Spirit: For those of us who haven’t heard you before, what will we get to hear, and what will we get to see?

Shirley King: Oh, I love to have a whole lot of fun! Daddy sure said the right thing: “Let the good times roll.” I let everything roll! I have fun onstage.

Now that my dad is not here, I keep some of his songs alive, but I don’t focus on doing his music, all (exclusively), because I’m not B.B. King, I’m Shirley King, and we’re two different people. Basically, I tell people, “He played (his guitar) Lucille, and I shake a mean hip” (laughs)! My Lucille is my hip.

Q: And, as we all know, your dad was quite the showman, so it’s safe to say, you learned from the best.

A: Oh, I did. I’d sit onstage nightly, and watch Etta James, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke – because when my dad started out, he was on the chitlin circuit. All those guys were R&B stars, and he was the only blues guy. And now, like I said, I just wrap myself up in everybody, ‘cause I had a little bit of training, just sitting onstage. And I got a chance to see the greats.

Q: That was a great education, I’m sure.

A: It was. I think I’m bless ed from it, too. That saved me, probably saved my life. I was sick, the way my father was being treated (before his death in 2015). I wanted to see if I could do anything to help. They did give me some good tips, and I tried to do what I could.

Q: Tell me about your work with Oak Street Health.

A: That saved me, probably saved my life. I was sick, the way my father was being treated (before his death in 2015). I wanted to see if I could do anything to help. They did give me some good tips, and I tried to do what I could.

Q: What advice would you give young people wanting to follow in your footsteps?

A: Shirley King would love for some of the kids to come to this performance – if they can play any kind of instrument, of the kids to come to this performance – if they can play any kind of instrument, and want to be a star with me that night. Shirley King: ‘Cause I know my daddy’s spirit is with me, and blessed to be working with Oak Street. Everybody has a B.B. King story, ‘cause these are people that grew up with my father, and kept being B.B. King fans, until the day he left this earth. So I get a chance to hear good things about my dad, and it’s just a good feeling, you know?

Q: Are there any up-and-coming Kings that we might soon hear about?

A: There sure is! My little granddaughter, Jasmine Johnson. He (B.B. King) gave her some money, and the first thing she wanted to do was go buy a guitar. I bought her one, and within five to six months, she started playing, writing her own songs, and singing. I was like, “Whoa, that’s what he was doing!”

Pictured left is Shirley King is performing as her father, the late and great B.B. King watches her.