

SHELTER ISLAND

CHARTING HIS COURSE

Trailblazing sailor who 'fell in love' with his town makes history again as its first Black councilman

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Q&A

Benjamin Dyett Jr. never envisioned himself as a politician. Deep down, he's always been a sailor.

But Dyett said the thrill of racing boats around Shelter Island one summer three decades ago led him to "fall in love" with the small town where he's now making history as the first Black councilman.

Dyett, 62, began the role in January, following the pioneering footsteps of his father, Dr. Benjamin Dyett, who he said was the first Black doctor to join the staff at two Westchester hospitals in the 1950s.

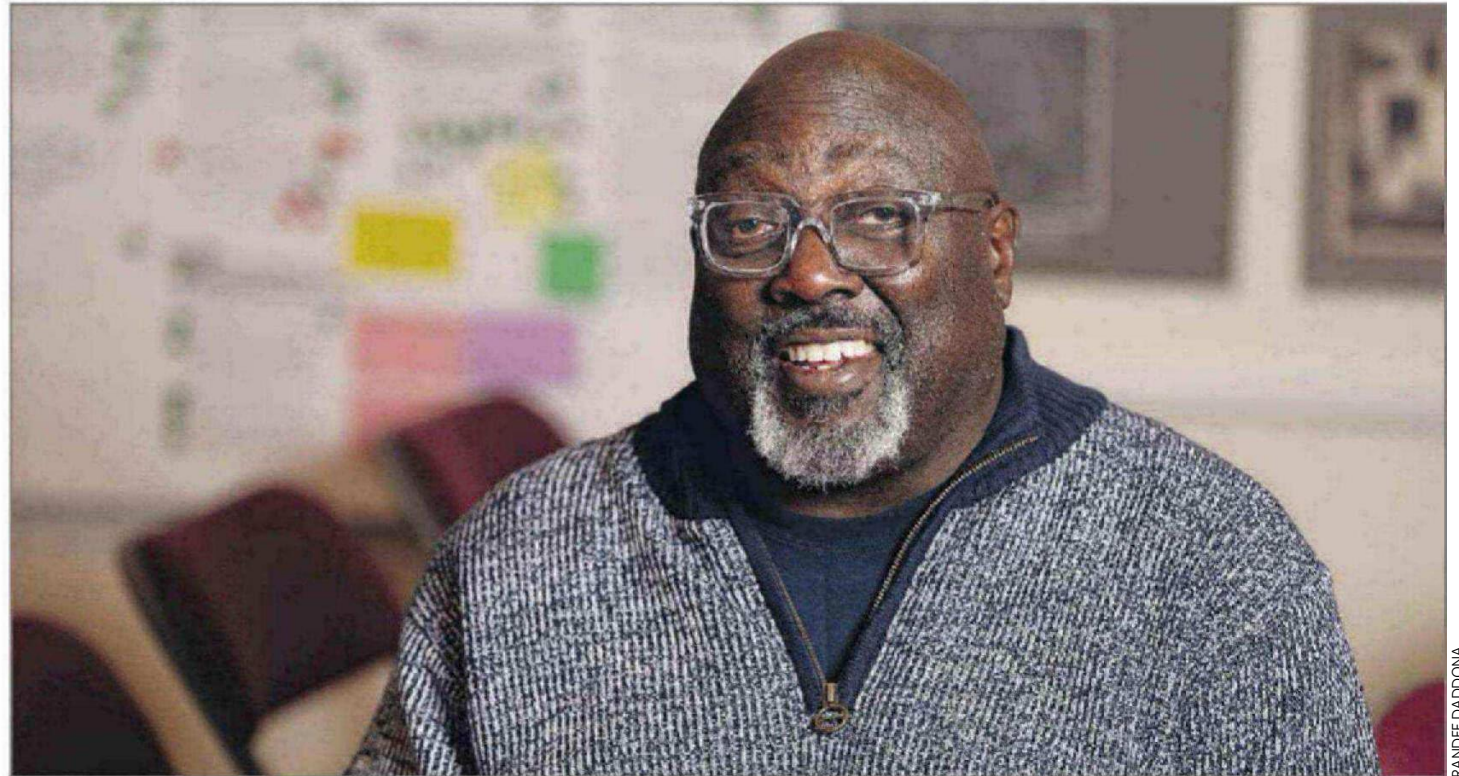
On an island where less than 1% of approximately 3,200 residents are Black, according to the 2020 census, Dyett said he has been proud to be a trailblazer — first as the first Black vice commodore of Shelter Island Yacht Club and now as a councilman.

Town Supervisor Amber Brach-Williams said she appreciates the "historic significance" of Dyett's election, noting: "It is good to have another diverse voice on the board to help us be mindful of equity and inclusion."

A retired real estate attorney and entrepreneur, Dyett previously was a longtime board member of the island's Sylvester Manor, a former plantation where enslaved Africans worked along with indentured or paid Native American and European laborers.

The current Sylvester Manor Educational Farm aims to preserve the property's history and support educational programs. Dyett also cofounded a farming initiative there.

The councilman grew up in White Plains and earned a bachelor's in history from Boston University before later graduating from New York University



Shelter Island Councilman Benjamin Dyett Jr. discusses his life and career at Shelter Island Town Hall on Wednesday.



School of Law.

He and his wife, Rosemarie, have traveled across the globe on sailing adventures. Their daughter Ella is 25.

Dyett discussed his journey to public office this week with Newsday. The interview was edited for clarity and length.

How did your parents influence you? What takeaways do you have from their experiences?

They did a lot of trailblazing. They were very involved in the civil rights movement. And they were all about education, education, education. And that's what they gave us. I have three older sisters. They put us all through

private school. They put us all through college. Because they saw that as the path to independence and having your own life, creating your own destiny.

The main takeaway is really: integrity is important. Authenticity is really important and hard work is really important because you're only going to get credit for half of it.

When you ran for town board, did you know if any other Black candidates had tried running before?

I didn't have to think about it. Because no. I've been here for 30 years and I haven't seen them.

Did you get recruited into running for office?

I did. I was slowly getting more active politically. I had been sitting on a town committee for three years. Basically, I was unhappy with the last administration and how they be-

haved and how they ran things. There was a point I decided I either have to stop complaining to everybody at every dinner party I go to or do something.

What can sailing instill in children?

Independence, confidence. At the yacht club we stick kids who are 8 years old in a boat by themselves and send them off. And they have to command their own vessel. If it capsizes, they have to turn it over, flip it back up, bail it out. Boys and girls. The confidence and independence that it shows them at that age is life changing.

How central is Sylvester Manor to telling the story of Shelter Island?

I think it's critical. Before this place was Shelter Island it was Sylvester Manor. And we're still learning stuff every day. We uncover mounds of in-

formation every year. From the beginning, our mission was always to get the Shelter Island community involved in the manor. But the other mission was to get off this rock and build awareness of what it is.

Are there assumptions people make about you that maybe aren't accurate?

Well the best thing is, you know, they routinely underestimate me, which is to my advantage. And it always has been. So that's a good thing.

Is there anyone you would say was a role model in your life?

I was lucky to have a bunch of them in my life. Friends of my parents. Not so much public people. I'm still mad at Barack Obama for taking my spot at Harvard Law School. I got wait-listed. He got in. We were the same year. He took my spot.