

Wilce Levan Cooke

Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*
May 6, 2018



Wilce Levan Cooke is a living testament, against the odds, to leadership, dedication, service and integrity. He was born and raised in the city of Benton Harbor, Michigan, by a single mother who imparted to him and his three sisters the values needed to excel and exceed the socioeconomic expectations of growing up African-American in rural mid-20th century America. In 1958, Cooke graduated from Benton Harbor High School and went on to earn his LPN from Oakland Community College, an AA in political science and sociology from Lake Michigan College and a bachelor's degree in political science and sociology from Western Michigan University (WMU). While there he received a National Upper Division Scholarship and was named a member of WMU Honor's College. He also has adult education instructor certification from Model Cities Program/Area Five School and training from the Mayor's Leadership and Advance Leadership Institute.

In 1968, when Cooke began working at Mercy Center, which later became Lakeland Health, he was the only male nurse in Southwest Michigan. He has seen many changes at Lakeland, including advances in medical technology, improvements and expansions in infrastructure, increased computerization, and improved race relations. During his 50-year tenure at Lakeland, Cooke served as a nurse at the Benton Harbor School-based Clinic and Benton Harbor Teen Center in the 1980s. He also taught in the Benton Harbor Area Schools medical assistant program in the 1990s.

In addition to his contribution to healthcare in Berrien County and Southwest Michigan, Cooke has been actively involved in the political, public and civic life of his local community and beyond. Beginning in 1977, he served in different capacities and on several Berrien County and Republican Party committees, commissions and boards at the local, state and national levels. He also served as mayor of Benton Harbor from 1981 to 1987 and 2004 to 2011. During those years, he testified before two United States Congressional subcommittees, on behalf of the National League of Cities, presenting the case for over 15,000 American cities on "The Impact of the proposed elimination of the general revenue sharing program on local governments." He also had the privilege of meeting four American presidents: Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Throughout all his years of public service, Cooke proved to be a strong and dedicated leader who focused on helping and serving others at the local, state and national levels.

In his post-politics life, Cooke, a lifelong citizen of Benton Harbor, continues to make significant contributions to his community, including in his local church. In 2013, he founded the Wilce L. Cooke Foundation as a way to provide healthcare scholarships to Benton Harbor area residents and enhance healthcare education and health and wellness outreach in Benton Harbor and Southwest Michigan. People from all aspects of his life have been blessed to know him as an employee, mayor, colleague, teacher, leader, nurse, friend and fellow citizen.

For his lifelong commitment to leveraging his opportunities and skills to better the life and health of the community through personal engagement and service, Andrews University takes great pleasure in honoring Wilce Levan Cooke with the degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*.