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COVID-19 latest hurdle cleared by 105-year-old Gilbert

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com

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Kathryn Brown
Gilbert

Submitted

When Kathryn Brown Gilbert got her second vaccination against COVID-19 on Feb. 12, it was just the latest in more than a century's worth of milestones for a Bowling Green resident who was something of a trailblazer for women in business.

Gilbert, who will turn 106 in August, lived and worked most of those years in Bowling Green, where she was once well-known for her pioneering roles in the business community.

She lives quietly today in a Chestnut Street home with her daughter and son-in-law, but Gilbert's younger years were anything but tranquil.

A pioneering L&N Railroad worker who could often be found climbing up the coal cars to inspect them,

Gilbert also briefly worked in a Curtiss-Wright Corp. defense plant during World War II.

A graduate of the Bowling Green Business University that was eventually merged with Western Kentucky University, Gilbert married U.S. Army Sgt. Vernon Gilbert in 1945. A short time later, she went to work as secretary of the Bowling Green Chamber of Commerce.

As described in a Bowling Green Daily News article from 1950, Gilbert was a one-woman show at the chamber, acting as “manager, secretary ... and even window-washer.”

Despite juggling so many duties, Gilbert guided the chamber through a period of growth that saw membership expand from 150 to 350 and pledges balloon from \$4,000 to \$13,000 during a four-year period.

“Looking back, she was pretty popular,” said Glenda White, Gilbert’s daughter and only child. “People would come to her if they needed to know anything about Bowling Green.

“She was quite important. She was somebody.”

Born in 1953, White doesn't remember Gilbert's years at the chamber; but she recalls stories of her mother's dedication to the job even through some harrowing experiences.

Working at a chamber-sponsored Baby Beef Show, Gilbert was tying a ribbon on an award-winning calf when a large bull charged her, knocking her unconscious.

Gilbert was back at work the next day, White said.

A champion dancer during her days at the business university, Gilbert later worked with her husband in a downtown retail business and served six terms as president of the city's Lioness Club.

The oldest living member of Bowling Green's First Baptist Church, Gilbert has cleared many more of life's hurdles since those younger days.

White, who retired after working 30 years at WKU and is now Gilbert's caretaker, said her mother has survived breast cancer and pancreatitis and overcome gall bladder and hip surgeries.

Gilbert, widowed since 1995, drove a car until age 99 and danced at her granddaughter's wedding when she was 100.

And now she has lived through the worst of the coronavirus pandemic and appears ready to survive that as well. "She had the second dose of the vaccine on Feb. 12," White said. "She did just fine."

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