

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

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Coleman Young elected first black mayor of Detroit

Coleman Young, a state senator, and John F. Nichols, former police commissioner, faced off in a race for the mayor's office when Detroit was evenly split between black and white residents. Both candidates kept race out of the political contest and Young narrowly defeated Nichols in the Nov. 6, 1973 election. Young received 231,798 votes to Nichols' 217,479. Although accepted into the University of Michigan, the future mayor could not afford to attend. Instead, Young was drafted into service in World War II, where he served with the all-black Tuskegee Airmen. After the war, Young worked as a cab driver, painter, salesman and dry cleaner, frequently getting into trouble at his jobs over his efforts to organize workers. He was fired from a job at the post office after attempting to start a union. Young helped organize the Negro labor council, an organization dedicated to finding better opportunities for black workers. Labor organization brought Young to politics but he lost his first bid to become a state representative from Detroit's Black Bottom District in 1959.

Young persisted and was elected state senator in 1963. As mayor, Young attempted to bring reconciliation to a city that had been bitterly divided since the 1967 riots.

He attempted to save downtown with the Renaissance Center and he helped General Motors build a plant in Poletown. Young also devoted his time in office to increasing the minority-owned contracts awarded by the city.