

EUGENE ALLEN, 90

'Humble butler' served eight American presidents

BY WIL HAYGOOD

Eugene Allen, who endured a harsh and segregated upbringing in his native Virginia and went on to work for eight presidents as a White House butler, died March 31 of renal failure at Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park. He was 90.

Mr. Allen and his wife, Helene, were profiled in a Washington Post story in 2008 that explored the history of blacks in the White House. The couple were excited about the possibility of Barack Obama's historic election and their opportunity to vote for him. Helene, however, died on the eve of the election, and Mr. Allen went to vote alone. The couple had been married for 65 years.

Afterward, Mr. Allen, who had been living quietly in a simple house off Georgia Avenue NW in the District, experienced a fame that he had only witnessed beforehand. He received a VIP invitation to Obama's swearing-in, where a Marine guard escorted him to his seat. Eyes watering, he watched the first black man take the oath of office of the presidency.

Mr. Allen was besieged with invitations to appear on national TV shows. There were book offers and dozens of speaking requests, all of which he declined. He also received hundreds of letters, some from as far away as Switzerland, from people amazed at the arc of his life and imploring him to hold on while thanking him for his service to the nation. People in his neighborhood would stop him and explain to their children the outlines of his life.

"He liked to think of himself as just a humble butler," his only child, Charles, said Thursday. Aside from his son, Mr. Allen is survived by five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Mr. Allen was born July 14, 1919, in Scottsville, Va. He worked as a waiter at the Homestead resort in Hot Springs, Va., and later at a country club in Washington. In 1952, he heard of a job opening at the White House and was hired as a "pantry man," washing dishes, stocking cabinets and shining silverware for \$2,400 a year.

He became maitre d', the most prestigious position among White House butlers, under Ronald Reagan. During Mr. Allen's 34 years at the White House, some of the de-



FAMILY PHOTO

Eugene Allen serves President Gerald Ford, Ford's wife, Betty, and others on Ford's birthday one year. Mr. Allen and Ford shared a birth date of July 14. Mr. Allen started working at the White House in 1952.

isions that presidents made within earshot of him came to have a direct bearing on his life — and that of black America.

Mr. Allen was in the White House when Dwight D. Eisenhower dealt with the Little Rock desegregation crisis. Eisenhower once asked him about the cancellation of Nat "King" Cole's TV show, which the president enjoyed. Mr. Allen told him that the show had difficulty attracting advertisers, who were worried about white Southern audiences boycotting their products.

When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Mr. Allen was invited to the funeral. He declined for the most generous of reasons: "Somebody had to be at the White House to serve everyone after they came from the funeral," he told The Post. When Jackie Kennedy returned to the White House afterward, she gave him one of the president's ties. Mr. Allen had it framed.

Mr. Allen served entertainers including Sammy Davis Jr., Duke Ellington, Pearl Bailey and Elvis Presley. He flew aboard Air Force One. He sipped root beer at Camp David with Jimmy Carter and visited Eisenhower in Gettysburg after he left the White House. There were always Christmas and birthday cards from the families of the presidents he had served.

He looked up one evening in the White House kitchen to see a lone figure standing in the door-

way: It was Martin Luther King Jr., who had insisted on meeting the butlers and maids. Mr. Allen smiled when King complimented him on the cut of his tuxedo.

Mr. Allen served cups and cups of milk and Scotch to help Lyndon B. Johnson settle his stomach when protesters were yelling outside the White House gates during the Vietnam War. He longed to say something to Johnson about his son, who was serving in Vietnam at the time but dared not — save for acknowledging that his son was alive when Johnson asked about him.

It pained Mr. Allen to hear vulgar words, sometimes racially charged, flowing from Johnson's mouth; and it delighted him when Johnson signed the historic civil rights bills of 1964 and 1965.

Sometimes Mr. Allen's own life seemed to stop beneath the chandeliered light. First lady Nancy Reagan came looking for him one afternoon, and Mr. Allen wondered whether he or a member of his staff had done something wrong. She assured him that he had not but also told him that his services would not be needed at the upcoming state dinner for German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Mr. Allen tensed, wondering why.

"She said, 'You and Helene are coming to the state dinner as guests of President Reagan and myself,'" he recounted in the Post interview. Mr. Allen thought he was the first butler to receive an

invitation to a state dinner. He and Helene — she was a beautiful dresser — looked resplendent that night. The butlers on duty seemed to pay special attention to the couple as they poured champagne for guests — champagne that Mr. Allen himself had stacked in the kitchen.

Mr. Allen was mindful that with the flowering of the black power movement, many young people questioned why he would keep working as a butler, with its connotations of subservience. But the job gave him great pride, and he endured the slights with a dignified posture.

"He was such a professional in everything he did," said Wilson Jerman, 81, whom Mr. Allen hired to work at the White House in the early 1960s. "When my wife, Gladys, died in 1966, he told me not to worry about a thing. I didn't think I could get through that period, and he just took me by the hand. I'll never forget it."

Mr. Allen retired in 1986, after having been promoted to maitre d' five years earlier. He possessed a dazzling array of framed photographs with all of the presidents he had served, in addition to gifts and mementos from each of them.

The last item to be framed and placed on Eugene Allen's basement wall was a condolence letter from George W. and Laura Bush. It arrived from the White House just after the death of Helene.

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