

Hi, Muhammad,

Thank you for agreeing to an interview. I'm so happy to be able to highlight you as a "Person You Should Know" in my October newsletter. Here are a few questions:

Were you born in Clearwater? If not – what brought you to Clearwater?

Thank you for the opportunity to share with your audience through this newsletter. I was born in Kingstree, S.C., in 1955 as Randolph A. Tisdale. My stepfather and mother moved to Clearwater in 1964 when I was 9 years old. My stepfather was following better work and opportunity for his family. My grandmother and her family had moved here a year or so ahead of us.

Schooling and education?

I attended Williams Elementary School, Skycrest Elementary, John F. Kennedy Junior High and Dunedin Senior High School up to the 11th grade.

Were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

I never got involved with any school activities, though I loved taking wood shop classes. I liked to draw, so my mother enrolled me in art classes after school.

What's been your career path?

My job with the City of Clearwater was my career starter. I finished my general education with getting my GED and while working with the city continued my education through college courses and training opportunities that the city provided for its employees.

Do you have children? Care to share about your family?

I have five adult children, four grandchildren and one great granddaughter.

What changes have you seen in Clearwater over the last 40-plus years that you've lived and worked here?

I have seen much change from the time I've been living in Clearwater and working for this city. The city was under a civil service origination when I started work in 1973. Since that time, I have been involved with helping to transform this city to a contract base operation with contract agreements between the City of Clearwater and its employees. I've served as its chief shop steward and vice president of local CWA. I worked my way through the ranks to become its first African American stormwater manager, serving under five City Managers, and running a division with 37 employees under my charge from 1994 to 2010.

I was very proud of what this division achieved in reducing the drainage problems with the city and keeping up the beautiful appearance of this city. Our greatest accomplishment was a 100 million dollar capital project list being fulfilled.

Tell me about your involvement in the Clearwater Urban Leadership Coalition?

In 2019, a group of residents and citizens came together to establish a community reinvestment agency within North Greenwood Community to eliminate slum and blight conditions within the community.

You and others worked so hard to see the approval of a second CRA in Clearwater, in the North Greenwood community. What do you envision the North Greenwood CRA looking like ...

In 5 years:

I hope to see the beginning of zoning changes that will help this area to achieve its goals, with increasing affordable housing stock and incentives to help the commercial corridors be developed to meet the needs of the community and that of Clearwater through a rich historical environment.

In 10 years:

Within this time, we should have in place a real viable business center, social programs with successful outcomes, and housing to re-engage residents so they want to live and work and stay here.

In 15 years:

I want to be able to come back here within this time to see North Greenwood Community being highly respected as a community and supported with the same business opportunities that other parts of our city have. I hope to see economic growth and development with a cultural impact to attract tourists.

What challenges do you see facing Clearwater?

The current challenge is in land development, the need to address density control, keeping up with the pace of inflation. There is a changing climate of service providers ... costs are driving blue collar workers to relocate farther from their work and increase their travel time.

The City of Clearwater is at a crossroads of measuring its capacity to serve our tourists needs over that of our residents. We must decide on reaching a balance of interests of business interests and our citizens who need to survive in this changing environment. The policies and laws must be social in nature and not driven solely by profit. Our tax revenues must be equally distributed.

Why are you moving away? And where are you moving? (SO sad!)

I've been here in Clearwater most of my adult life. After retirement in 2010, I didn't get the chance to finish what I've been striving to achieve for the last 40 years ... volunteering to see my community take on development that would be the corner stone, with resources in place to ensure its success. Now that the CRA is in place, it offers me the opportunity to walk away knowing that I've done my job as a community servant and allow for others to take up the challenge to continue to build.

What have you enjoyed most about your retirement?

I've been blessed as a former employee of this city to have a decent earning from my pension, that have allowed me to continue to be involved with my community and enjoy the beautiful City of Clearwater, and having my children still here and their children, enjoying good family life. I've enjoyed working and living in my community and seeing the progress. My legacy and the legacy of all those who came before me is history.

Do you have some "favorites" in Clearwater? Favorite restaurants? Favorite sports teams? Favorite parks? Favorite memories?

I've had the pleasure of working on jobs in this city and seeing some of best restaurants developed and serve the citizens who have come be like family.

My favorite restaurants have been Angie's, Chief Charlie's, and Clearwater Family Restaurant, Smith Grill and Island Way Grill.

I never followed much sports, but I always supported the little league football Greenwood Panthers.

My favorite parks have been Crest Lake Park, Cherry Harris, Sand Key and Engle Lake Park.

Best memories of Clearwater have been watching the transformation of a "good old boy system" to that of inclusion of all its citizens, and seeing the progress of this city trying to follow best practices for all of its citizens.

Do you care to share about your name change, from your birth name, and the importance of your religion?

I legally changed my name and family name in 1977, from (Tisdale) to Muhammad Abdur-Rahim, when I made a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia on a religious journey (Hajj). It was sponsored by boxing champ Muhammad Ali, who paid for my trip when I was 22 years old.

What advice would you offer those who are elected, or in leadership positions in Clearwater?

The only advice I would be able to share is to see your service as that of a "servant," working to address humanity problems, whether that is through politics, business or personal matters. When each of us sees our service to our fellow citizens as that of a servant, this will help all of us to advance in all areas of endeavors, with justice and equal rights. We must trust that diversity makes good business sense and we all win.

In the five years I've known you, I've seen you interact with a number of groups, sometimes as a leader, sometimes as a participant. You always conduct yourself with such dignity, and a calm, reassuring, thoughtful and intelligent manner. How did you learn to navigate group meetings that, at times, can be stressful or antagonistic? Or, what advice do you have to get people with diverse ideas/opinions to come to the table to compromise and shape outcomes?

I'm an autodidact (one who is self-taught). I've had to take on leadership roles most of my life, from taking care of my five smaller sisters while my mom worked, to leading community groups in new initiatives, union organizing. I've also learned from mentors, that I've always admired in their strength and approach. I was a student under great scholars who mentored me well. I learned that "It is a far, far better thing that I do (for others) than I have ever done." Life is stressful and hard on everyone. A committed person is motivated through achievements. A committed person works in a framework or environment with strong principles as its foundation. They only compromise when the whole is at risk of failing. The principle is only a frame to work within, much like a glass that contains fluid ... the liquid can change, but the container remains the same.

Favorite book or movie?

African American history books, self-help books and movies with great actors ... too many to name all. I love to read about my own history.

What advice would you offer younger folks who want to make positive change in their community?

First thing is to know yourself before you want to know the how's, why's, and who's. We all have a self-motivated mind that calls us to find happiness in life. We must find out what we are passionate about, and study what drives us to be passionately involved. This is the first step toward involvement ... issues that move us to make changes in our personal life, family, and community life. Then we move out on that commitment to make those changes. We become committed to get involved in the changes we are seeking.

Anything else you'd like to share?

My life has been so blessed to have traveled this world while being so young and seeing all the wonderful things in this world. This afforded me the opportunity to give back to my community with a viewpoint that has been unique in its approach to involvement ... for the betterment of humanity. I thank God for that and all those teachers along my path willing to share their insight with me, and I thank the residents that I've come to know and the employees that have been my colleagues. I'm truly blessed because of each one of them.

Thank you so much, Muhammad. You inspire me, and I am grateful for all that you've shared with me, and for your advice and guidance.