



Brigadier General (Retired)

James R. Gorham

DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

“Birds of a feather flock together, but the eagle flies alone,” said a young girl to Brigadier General J.R. Gorham, eyes locked calmly on the North Carolina Commissioner of Juvenile Justice, who had said those exact words just a few weeks prior while visiting at-risk children at Camp Willow Run. Unbeknownst to Gorham, who stood now within the four walls of a North Carolina at-risk facility, the young girl had been one of those children he addressed.

“I’ve decided I don’t want to be here anymore,” said the young girl. “I want to be an eagle and leave this place.” After hearing Gorham speak two weeks prior, she wanted to soar.

Gorham made it his goal to visit every at-risk youth facility and juvenile court in the state during his tenure as N.C. Commissioner of Juvenile Justice, a title he held from 2013 to 2017. He understood that relationships are critical in changing the trajectory of a child’s life, especially if headed in the wrong direction.

“The breakdown of the family unit is one of the biggest issues we face today,” he says, explaining that 90% of the children housed within at-risk facilities in North Carolina lack a relationship with their father or do not know their father at all.

If anyone knows the power of a father’s love, it’s Gorham. His relationship with his own father, Roy Gorham, inspired him to write his first book, *Sharecropper’s Wisdom – Growing Today’s Leaders the Old-Fashioned Way*.

Although Gorham grew up in a four-room shack with no running water, his father, a sharecropper, “never saw the glass half-empty,” he says. “He was always joyful and pleasant. Very seldom did he get upset. But when he did, you knew it; he was kind, but a disciplinarian.”

Love and discipline were constant themes of Gorham’s upbringing. Every Sunday, Gorham would carry 80 buckets of water from the family well to the front porch to help with the week’s washing. And though Gorham was expected at an early age to do his fair share of physical labor, he was also given equal portions of love and care: Gorham recounts the Christmas his father could not afford the three-speed English racer bicycle he wanted, so Roy saved enough to buy a bike from the Salvation Army and hand-paint it green.

“It was the ugliest girl’s hand-painted bicycle I had ever seen. But that year, my father was a hero,” says Gorham, who recounted riding around the neighborhood that afternoon with the other boys who had received their three-speed racers Christmas morning.

Growing up in poverty, Gorham knew a college education was out of the question unless he could find the financing. An education was his primary motive when he joined the Army at age 18. “My father always told me, ‘You become your company,’” says Gorham, and who decided to attend Officer Candidate School after returning from active duty. He completed the training a distinguished honor graduate.

“I had lots of struggles in my career,” says Gorham, who was overlooked more than once for promotions. But he put into action his father’s advice: “Develop relationships before you need them. And when you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hold on.”

Years later, when Gorham was told at a lunch meeting that he was being promoted to Brigadier General, he cried. Gorham is the first African American in the North Carolina National Guard to earn the title.

But Gorham’s success isn’t limited to the military sphere. He also worked 29 years for First Citizens Bank, eventually becoming vice president of the Kernersville branch. Such a long tenure at any single organization is almost unheard of today, and when asked to explain what kept him at First Citizens for almost three decades, the story once again comes back to his father, who passed away in 1983.

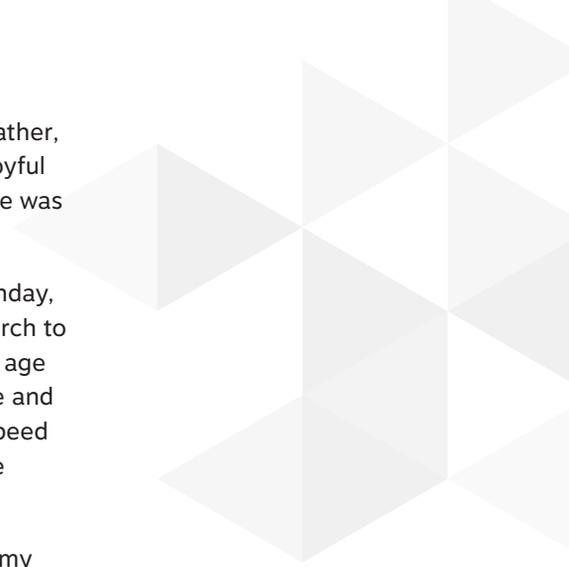
“After my father’s funeral, my siblings and I were discussing what to do my father’s tobacco crops. We decided that it was only fitting that we finish what he started,” says Gorham, who wanted no debts associated with his father’s name.

He asked his supervisor at First Citizens for the next eight Fridays off so he could finish the harvest. And though Fridays are the bank’s busiest days, his boss made it happen.

“That sealed the deal. His actions told me they cared about me and my family. There’s no price tag you can put on that,” reflects Gorham, who attributes his long-standing career at First Citizen’s to that moment.

As a man who served our country, our state’s at-risk youth, and our communities through his work, Gorham has already built quite a legacy. When asked how he wants to be remembered, he says, “As a man who worked hard to be an example to my children, my family, and my community.”

The sharecropper’s son will undoubtedly be remembered as such: an eagle that soared alone and loved so many.



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*You can purchase
Gorham’s book
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at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).*