

## "Simple Justice"

by Marsha Joyner 2004

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Coalition-Hawaii honored the former Congressman Thomas Ponce Gill, the principle author of Title VI of The Civil Rights Act July 1, 2004 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

While most freshmen Congress people are finding their way to the restrooms, our own Tom Gill was making a difference.

The Honorable Thomas P. Gill, member of the 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, served just one term, but that term helped shaped the future of America. The 88<sup>th</sup> Congress 1962-1964 was the era of the Kennedy/Johnson Presidencies. A time of great political force, energy, and power!

Born in Honolulu immediately after World War I, grew up during the depression, fought in the Second World War and began his public career during the atomic age, elected to Congress in 1962 Tom Gill had at last arrived at the seat of power.

After WWII people around the world were fighting to throw off the mantle of colonialist domination. The gravest domestic issue facing the United States was social rather than economic policies. The struggle was to assure everyone their full rights as American citizens.

The Congress rejected President Harry S. Truman's civil rights program of 1948. However, his fight for that program established Civil Rights as a national issue.

Hawaii in 1946, thanks to President Harry S. Truman racial barriers were let down for Chinese and Filipinos. In 1952, Japanese, Koreans, and Samoans became eligible for citizenship. Almost overnight the electorate changed. No longer could the whites, and part-Hawaiians control the elections. The base upon which the Republican Party had stood for more than 50 years was no more. It had broadened far beyond the expectation of any Republican. And the Democrats took over."

In the 1950s the "Local People" began to throw off the yoke of racism. The development of the Democratic Party as a major force in Hawai'i's politics occurred. Soon thereafter Hawaii became a state. Tom & Lois were among the builders of the emerging Democratic Party of Hawaii. In the early days of Democratic Party organizing in Hawaii, and during each of Tom's political campaigns, Lois Gill spent countless hours building lists of supporters, campaigning door-to-door, speaking at coffee hours, and fulfilling the commitments of a political spouse and mother of six.

Tom performed both as the Democratic campaign and committee chair for the elections of 1952 and 1954, when the "Democratic Revolution" ended decades of Republican political control.

While serving as Territorial Senate council and administrative aide to the Speaker of the House, in the 1950s, Tom Gill played a key role in drafting social, economic and environmental

legislation considered to liberal that Governor Sam King a Republican. He vetoed 71 out of some 80 or 90 pieces of legislation-

Tom Gill was elected as a representative from the Fifteenth District to the Thirtieth Territorial Legislature. In 1959 was elected to the first State of Hawaii Legislature, where he served as majority floor leader.

The Kennedy-Johnson ticket conducted a thoroughly united campaign that brought a narrow victory over Richard Nixon. In 1963 Hawaii and Alaska were changed from "at-large" members to regular members of the House of Representatives.

Tom arrived in the Congress in January of 1963 and immediately stood out from the crowd of freshmen. Not only for his size, but his work ethic, drive, determination and commitment to the cause of equal rights for everyone. He just flat out worked the other side. His perceived arrogance comes from knowing who he was and what he was about.

Inasmuch as the brash, vigorous painstaking Freshman Congressman was designated floor manager for the Civil Rights Bill as well as principle author for Title IV it was his job to move the bill through newly elected the House of Representatives.

Poised between the victory of the past and the obstacle of the future and fearing the loss of the few southern allies they had, the Kennedy brothers opted to move Civil Rights by executive and not legislative means.

Publicly they acted boldly but choose to go soft on the Civil Rights Bill inside the halls of Congress. This set the stage for conflict between the Kennedy's and the idealistic young freshman congressman. He felt that his commitment to civil rights was why he was elected and there was to be no compromise. Tom let the Kennedy's know that he would not back down. And he did not. Tom worked harder than anyone could imagine fulfilling his promise to his constituents.

### **The Gill Bill**

Early in 1963 Tom Gill wrote Title VI of the Civil Rights Bill. In Hawaii it was known as The Gill Bill. It carried his name because Tom wrote the bill and he was not a member of the Judiciary committee and the committee accepted it.

In 1963, a few weeks after the riots in Birmingham, Ala. President Kennedy sent a draft civil rights bill to Congress. He concluded his message with these words:

"I ask you to look into your hearts--not in search of charity, for the Negro neither wants nor needs condescension--but for the one plain, proud and priceless quality that united us all as Americans: A sense of justice.

"In this year of the emancipation centennial, justice requires us to insure the blessings of liberty for all Americans and their posterity--not merely for reasons of economic efficiency, world diplomacy and domestic tranquility--but, above all, because it is right."

August of 1963, Tom and several other Democratic Congress members ventured to the Lincoln Memorial to be a witness to history, - the March on Washington. While they were among the millions of participants, the Republicans penalized them. On 23 issues that were usually counted as one vote, this August day they were counted as 23. Therefore, Tom and his cohorts were listed as missing 23 votes; an issue that his Hawaii Republican opponent used against him.

After the March on Washington President Kennedy went on record as saying, "Title VI was Simple Justice".

Kennedy was assassinated before he could see the bill become law.

The succession President Johnson bought a new sense of urgency, determination and power to the White House. There were several southerners who worked and supported Tom's position on the Civil Rights Bill, and who told him they could not vote for the bill and would vote against it. So Gill knew they would not be present for the vote. The House passed the bill Feb. 10 1964 by a vote of 290 to 130.

Tom made a promise to them not to blow their cover and he has kept that promise. This many years later Tom would not tell me who they were.

Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona voted against the bill saying that it was "unconstitutional." Senator George A. Smathers, Democrat of Florida said, "We find all of the force of the Federal Government directed at the South." He predicted that if a dictator ever appeared in this country, "that man will ride to power on the influence and power he will get under Titles VI and VII." These sections of the bill provide for a Federal cutoff of funds to programs administered in a discriminatory way, and for a fair-employment commission.

Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, the Democratic Senate floor manager of the bill said the civil rights bill of 1964 was "the greatest piece of social legislation of our generation." After the roll call, several thousand people gathered in the plaza before the floodlit Capitol to applaud the Senate Democratic leader, Mike Mansfield of Montana, and the Republican leader, Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois. Mr. Dirksen was instrumental in shaping the compromise that the Senate passed after a 78-day filibuster.

Senator Mike Mansfield said that there was "no room for unwarranted sentiments of victory," and that there should be "no sense of triumph but a profound humility" upon the part of those who had labored and voted for the bill.

Therefore, we come here 40 years later to give thanks to our own Tom Gill who labored long and hard, as the House floor manager, to see the Civil Rights bill become law. "*Change Agents*" are very seldom held up as heroes. However, Tom must be recognized. His story because it's our story, must be told.

During his term in office Gill was  
Floor manager for the Civil Rights Act of 1964  
President Johnson's major tax cut  
Davis-Bacon Act 1964  
Anti-poverty Act 1964

Medicare 1965

Voting Rights Act 1965

Funding the East-West Center 1964

All without tooting his own horn. Which is too bad. . Because we come 40 years later with a generation of Hawaii residents that do not know of his accomplishments and what it has come to mean for all of his.

TITLE VI—

NONDISCRIMINATION IN FEDERALLY ASSISTED PROGRAMS

SEC. 601. No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

Post Script:

This year marks 40 years since the signing of the Civil Rights Act, yet a much larger struggle continues.

The credit belongs not only to the civil rights workers who put their bodies and their lives on the line, and to the civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., who aroused public consciousness,

But in large measure to Lyndon Johnson and our own Tom Gill who believed in the cause of making life better not only in Hawaii but also across America.