

After spending 42 years helping those less fortunate, New Opportunities CEO retires

BY MIKE PATRICK REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN March 30, 2021

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WATERBURY, CT. — From left, Moises Suriel, artist, and James Gatling, President and CEO, New Opportunities look over portraits Monday in Waterbury. Gatling is retiring from New Opportunities after more than four decades. Steven Valenti Republican-American

WATERBURY — Sometimes, James Gatling said, you think you know what you want to do with your life, but life has different plans.

“I went to college, I studied and I became a chemist,” he said. “Sometimes you find out what you’re supposed to do in life and if you listen to that inner voice, you find out you’re in the right place.”

Gatling, 73, stayed in the “right place” – New Opportunities of Waterbury, Inc. – for 42 years.

He retires as head of the agency today.

He spent most of his years as president and CEO, guiding the Lyndon B. Johnson-era community action agency from a Waterbury-centric organization for the poor into one that fights poverty in 60 towns, including Torrington and Meriden, and in 2019 served more than 63,000 people.

“There would not be an OIC (Opportunities Industrialization Center) in Waterbury without (him),” said Reginald Beamon, executive director of the Waterbury Opportunities Industrialization Center, a job training agency that spun off of NOW. “He’s been one of our staunchest supporters over many years.”

After earning his chemistry degree from Hampton University in Virginia, Gatling was recruited by Uniroyal as a research chemist and came to Waterbury in 1970.

Uniroyal had a program tutoring inner-city children, and Gatling volunteered to tutor kids in Berkeley Heights, an affordable housing complex in the city's North End. He later joined the NOW board of directors, where he said he "got a taste of social services and how it impacted lives in the community."

He served on the board until 1978, and became president and CEO a year later.

"I had no idea, nor did I even have it in my mind... that I would end up working with a social service type of agency," he said. "The thing that really captivated me was you could see the results of your efforts immediately. That made me feel really good about who I was as a person."

NEW OPPORTUNITIES OF WATERBURY began in 1964, as a result of Johnson's war on poverty, a part of which was the formation of community action agencies nationwide. The idea was to drive the poor toward self-sufficiency by requiring they participate in community efforts to lift them out of poverty.

Low-income residents served on community action boards then and today, as Gatling said they make up a third of NOW's board.

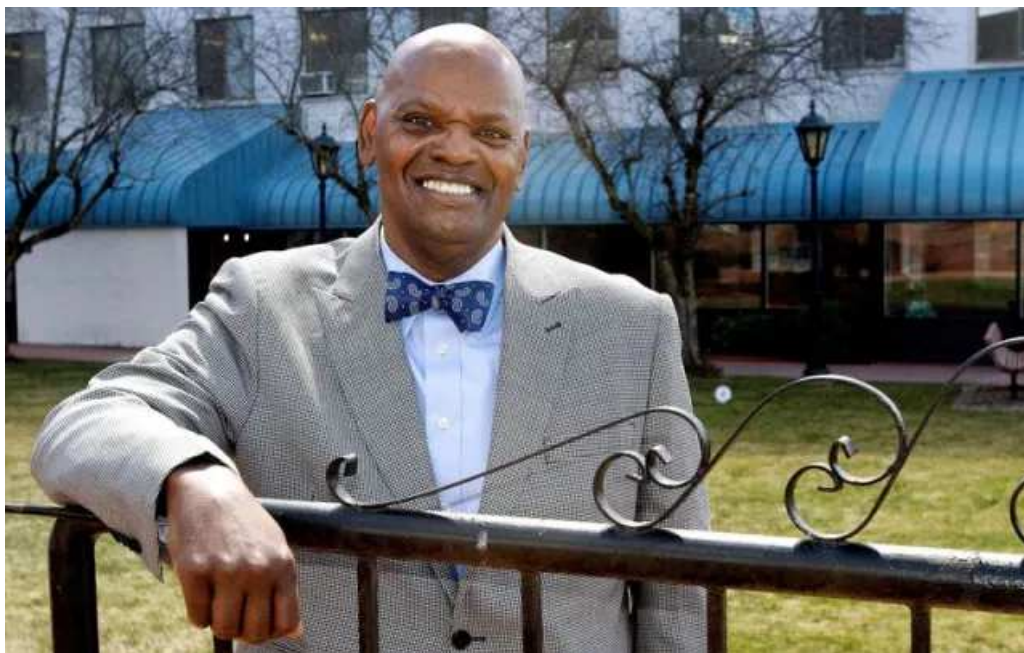
Gatling said he joined the organization during a tumultuous time, after it had gone through several changes in leadership.

"Number one, I listened to people, to bring different factions together, to bring peace," he said. "The anger and all that disappeared under my leadership."

NOW's services include energy assistance and weatherizing of homes, AIDS and HIV prevention, employment education and training, early childhood education programs, elderly services, a homeless shelter and ex-offender programs and re-entry services.

Gatling said the organization's budget fluctuates between \$35 million and \$55 million, with most of it coming from federal government grants administered through the state. NOW also receives state funding and earns some of its budget through energy conservation and home care initiatives, he said.

"This place, New Opportunities, is one of the few places that the low income and the minority communities feel like this belongs to them," Gatling said. "There's nothing else in Waterbury that they feel more attachment to, that if they have a problem, they can come here."



WATERBURY, CT. —James Gatling outside New Opportunities in Waterbury Monday. Gatling, 73, is retiring from New Opportunities after more than four decades. Steven Valenti Republican-American

NOW'S LATEST INITIATIVE is a hydroponic vegetable farm in Torrington. Gatling said he has high hopes for the venture, which broke ground last summer.

"I think it's going to be a godsend for the agency," he said. "I think it's going to generate revenue that will pour into the organization and keep some of the programs funded."

The facility is expected to grow lettuce and herbs using nutrient-rich water instead of soil, and sell the produce across the Northeast. Gatling said that project is the realization of a decades-long dream he counts as one of his greatest successes at NOW.

Another, he said, is a now-defunct Afro-Latin-Indian festival that began in the 1980s and funded a scholarship program.

"We got together and said the Black and Hispanic community in Waterbury has to get together, because we have more in common than we have differences," he said.

The festival included art and essay competitions, the winners of which would receive four-year scholarships. Rising expenses canceled the festival after 20 years, but the scholarship program remained.

"The beauty of all of this, some of the young people who received our scholarships have become doctors, lawyers, accountants, school teachers," Gatling said. "The rate of college completion has been almost 91%. That's something that I'm really, really proud of."

One of those students was Alexandria Butler, daughter of state Rep. Larry B. Butler, D-72nd District. Butler said his daughter went on to become a dentist.

"She was able to go to Harvard University, the first African-American woman to graduate from their School of Endodontics," he said. "That's what a scholarship like that will actually lead to."

Butler said that in addition to handing out about \$2 million in scholarships, NOW under Gatling served the poor throughout the Waterbury, Torrington and Meriden areas.

"The most needy people in the community, especially the last few years when middle class people who lost their jobs now having to navigate the world of trying to get food stamps, fuel assistance and those services provided by the agency," he said. "The agency has done a remarkable job, and it starts with the man at the top."



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LAST YEAR, GATLING organized a Mattatuck Museum exhibit of pencil sketches, commissioned from artist Moises Suriel, of successful members of the city's African-American community.

In his retirement, he said, he will expand on that.

“What I want to do is write a book about that, so that the young people can see that although you may (be) growing up in a situation where you don’t have all the resources you think you need, there are people who were in the same situation, and look what they did,” he said. “I also want to show that Waterbury, the African-American community, although the crime is the highlight, there’s a whole lot of accomplishments that go unnoticed. I want to highlight that and just see how things work out from there.”

Bill Rybczyk, New Opportunities’ director of research, development and planning, was tapped to replace Gatling.

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