

YBOR CITY

Fifty years ago, an invisible gatekeeper watched over the front of some Southern businesses.

White patrons streamed through the front doors, but black customers knew not to enter. Their entrance was in the back — a different door for a different people.

The arduous battle to abolish such acts of bigotry eventually was won, but Cephas Gilbert knows the war to gain equality continues.

"But things are getting better," he says, pointing to the back of his Ybor City restaurant, Cephas's Hot Shop.

The back door that decades ago could have been a "colored entrance" serves as a tribute to a dozen civil rights leaders. Its glass panes feature portraits of Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Mary Bethune and others.

Gilbert, a native of Jamaica, admires those men and women but says he's no trailblazer. The laid-back restaurateur, curator, philosopher and social critic lives by a simple motto:

"It gots to be good and it gots to be right."

With Bob Marley on the stereo and Gilbert's variety of authentic cuisine on the menu, a trip to Cephas's Hot Shop, 1701 Fourth Ave., is like a trip to Jamaica, says customer Roger Ramsay.

"It takes me right back home," says Ramsay, a patron for 10 years. "I come here to be mellow and talk to my man Cephas. I've been in some rocky relationships, and he always gives me good advice. It's a great atmosphere."

Gilbert's meager 15-year-old restaurant is an eclectic, unofficial museum-in-progress. The mural-covered walls serve as a collage that includes family photos, postcards, portraits and famous quotes.

Gilbert not only displays the historic words of black leaders, but also shares his own truths, a mixture of social commentary and personal philosophy culled from 47 years of life.

At 16, Gilbert began working on ships, sailing from Jamaica to Nigeria. Rather than returning home, each time he arrived in a port he joined another ship. Eventually, he voyaged around the globe.

"I wanted to see the world. It was like a game," Gilbert says. "I learned a lot about culture. Everybody should have at least 10 years at sea, but when they reach 30, they should leave that life. A seaman can't raise a

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A restaurateur serves Jamaican cuisine with social commentary, a pinch of philosophy and a tinge of tradition.



A painting outside the Ybor City restaurant pays tribute to civil rights leaders.

food for thought



SHOP/Cephas serves homilies with grit

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family.”

Gilbert moved to Tampa after retiring from sailing at age 26. His nomadic lifestyle led him to his first maxim:

“When you stick out your hand, you see five roads. You have to know the right one and the good one to take, for some can be rocky and some can be rough. Only if you choose the right road and stay on it will you find happiness.”

Too many people automatically pick the road to fortune, Gilbert says.

“I don't have a lot of money. I struggle,” he says. “But if a man has health and respect, then that's a rich man right there.”

Respect for yourself and for others is a key to happiness, says Gilbert, who fears that because of its lack of respect, a generation of youth will be lost to crime and drugs.

“Everything builds upon respect, and the young kids suffer from a lack of it, especially for their elders,” Gilbert says. “Only if we start teaching respect can we get back that generation.”

After 21 years in the United States, Gilbert says that America's opportunities make it one of the best countries in the world.

“But if you stand there and believe that things will come to you freely — it's the biggest mistake you'll make in your life,” he says. “If you try, then you can make

yourself stronger, your conscience stronger, your kids stronger and your country stronger.”

Gilbert, who cooks, waits, buses and washes dishes at his restaurant, learned self-reliance at an early age.

“For small children in Jamaican house, first step: learn to wash pants. Second step: learn to clean house. Third step: learn to cook food,” Gilbert recalls. “Later on, if you get up in morning and wife walked out, then you know how to live.”

Charity and frugality were two other early lessons.

“In Jamaica, if a neighbor was hungry and I had food, then everybody ate,” Gilbert says. “There were no food stamps or thrift stores. If your pants split, you stitched them. There's no luxury.”

Those lessons prove useful, especially when business is frighteningly slow, says Gilbert, who sometimes works from 8 a.m. to 4 a.m.

“If I was working for somebody else, maybe I could be more further ahead,” Gilbert says, “but I want to be a role model. I want the younger generation to see that a black man can own his own business and be successful.”

Because three blocks separate Cephas's Hot Shop and the rejuvenated Seventh Avenue, Gilbert says he reaps little of the financial rewards of Ybor's popularity.

“Things for me are tough right



JIM REED/Tribune photo

Cephas Gilbert holds open the back door of his restaurant, Cephas's Hot Shop in Ybor City. The door is a tribute to civil rights leaders and advocates who fought to end an era in which the back door of many Southern businesses was the “colored entrance.”

now,” he says, “but I have to be strong. I have to hold on to show black kids that they can do it.”

Gilbert is troubled by the lack of black support for black-owned businesses.

“If I wasn't getting the support of my white customers, I wouldn't have a business,” says Gilbert, who estimates that 65 percent to 70 percent of his customers are white. “When I first came to Tampa, I saw lots of small, black businesses, but I no longer see them. I ask, ‘What happened?’”

Gilbert says part of the problem is a lack of a community feel in black neighborhoods.

“Even with nice houses, people use them like rat holes: All they do is run in and run out,” Gilbert says. “They don't take the time to support their community.”

Gilbert hopes more black people will open their own businesses and that the black community will support them.

“I would like the young generation to see that black businesses in the black community are good for the community,” he says.

Gilbert's first experience with racism came in the United States. It scared him, but it also gave him confidence in humanity.

While working in a shipyard, a

white co-worker shouted racial slurs and wanted to fight, but a white supervisor supported Gilbert.

“You'll find bad people in every lot, but [the experience] gave me faith that not everyone was like that,” Gilbert says.

“People in America — you're living in a great country. If you reach out, you can make it better. We have to live together and work together. If we do that, we'll see better come. If not, it'll be a sad day.”

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