

# Ilus Davis

48th Mayor of Kansas City

1917-1996

by Dory DeAngelo

“Ike” Davis was a community builder. His abilities enabled him to bring together political and civic leaders from different sides of an issue and to form a consensus that accomplished a great deal for Kansas City during his two terms as mayor.

Ilus Davis was born in Kansas City in 1917, attended Central High School, and was in the first freshman class of the University of Kansas City (now UMKC.) He worked through school as a shoe salesman and received his law degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia. In 1942 he went into the army, eventually serving under General Douglas MacArthur’s command in Manila. Davis returned home, married, and in 1948 ran for city council, serving two terms. He was elected mayor of Kansas City in 1963 and served from 1963 through 1971.

Davis’ first term as mayor was during the early days of the civil rights movement in the country. On the day of Martin Luther King’s funeral, black students left their high schools and marched toward City Hall. Davis met them, walked with them and stood on the south side steps of City Hall with Civil Rights leaders. Although he tried to calm the crowd, he was unable to stop the riots that soon engulfed areas of the city.

Davis and his city council moved quickly to pass the city’s public accommodation ordinance for equal treatment of all citizens in public places. He then pushed to form the city’s Human Relations Department and Human Resources Corporation to bring President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs to Kansas City.

Davis later said that promoting tolerance and improving human relations was his most important accomplishment as mayor. At his funeral in 1996, Herman Johnson, former president of the Kansas City branch of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, said, “Ilus Davis probably did more than one single person in Kansas City in the area of civil rights.” The Civic Mall between City Hall and the new U. S. Courthouse is named in his honor.



**Sources**

"Obituary." *Kansas City Star*, 5 September 1996.

"Editorial." *Kansas City Star*, 6 September 1996.

"Funeral." *Kansas City Star*, 7 September 1996.

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