

Vennard Wright

My County, My Community

When newly re-elected Prince George's County Executive Rushern L. Baker, III asked Vennard Wright to join his IT department, Vennard didn't even have to think about his answer.

"I just said yes," he recalls today. Vennard, who was working in the private sector when he was tapped, came to the position with more than 15 years of experience in the IT industry. "I felt like it was time for a change," he says, "and I had immense confidence in the County Executive as a person and a leader." But there is a deeper reason that Vennard was so fast to join Prince George's County. "It's my county," he says. "It's the county I grew up in and the county I live in. I saw the opportunity to come in and change the way people saw it. And while there have been a lot of challenges that we've had to work through to get to where we are today, I feel thrilled to have this opportunity to help change my community and move it in the right direction."

Vennard joined the team as Deputy to the Chief Information Officer of Prince George's County and is now the CIO, himself. His considerable experience and loyalty to his home county combine with a powerful drive to understand and then harness new technologies, resulting in a success that is not only professionally fulfilling, but also personally meaningful. "I like not being able to perfectly predict what I'm going to face tomorrow," Vennard says. "Technology is constantly changing, and changing rapidly. Working with technology gives me the benefit of working in new areas in different ways."

Vennard has never been one to rest on his laurels. If everything is running smoothly and only needs to be maintained, then he is not your guy. "I am always looking to improve," he says. "And in Prince George's County there was a lot of

room for improvement. Going into this I thought that if we achieved half the things I wanted to then we'd be rock stars. Well, we've achieved that and more. It's very exciting to be a part of it right now."

Traditionally, the role of Vennard's office was strictly to keep basic information services functioning. "We were just supposed to make sure that the phones were working and that the network was fine," he says. "But the way I view it is that IT has changed a lot. At this point it's about seeing where you can innovate and where you can make things more efficient. So we've started to take on that role."

Despite low expectations for the role of his office, Vennard has made great strides in using information technology to improve city services. In one case, he has consolidated all the city service numbers to a 311 call center. When a Prince George's County resident encounters anything from a downed tree to a pothole, he or she can dial one number and reach the appropriate office. The county's 311 call center received hundreds of thousands of calls last year. The result of another such initiative is increased transparency, as Prince George's County is in the process of moving all of its data warehousing online and making it public. Any digital record that the county processes will be transparent and available for the public to view online.

These proactive efforts are only the beginning, it seems. "One of the biggest complaints the county receives from the business community is that the permitting process is very difficult and can take a long time," Vennard says. "So we have combined the functions of permitting, inspections, and enforcement into a single agency. We've put new systems in and retrained our staff, and we went live with this new agency as of July 1, 2013."



But the most impressive and promising project initiated under Vennard's leadership is a pilot program launching this summer that will allow students in Prince George's County to participate in STEM curricula (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) at other schools, virtually, through the cloud. Partnering with Lockheed Martin and Cisco, the county will provide three schools with the technology that will allow students at any one of the schools to participate in classes and discussions at any of the others.

"Many students today who are growing up in Prince George's County have had an experience similar to mine," Vennard says. "They haven't necessarily seen people close to them who have been successful in the sciences and in math. They don't think they can go into IT or other science and technology fields. This STEM cloud resource will be accessible by the students at school and at home. They will be able to communicate with the teachers, ask them questions through the cloud, and get answers, either privately or shared with other students."

The pilot will be tested by paid interns this summer and will be implemented in three county schools in the fall. "It is much larger than a mere IT project," Vennard emphasizes. "It has the potential to change the way our schools operate. And it could help bring cohesion to the STEM subjects, which are traditionally taught separately. We're trying to apply a project-based model and work in all the disciplines across the board."

Beyond the classroom, Vennard sees another possible benefit. "We're also creating career pathways with Lockheed Martin and Cisco," he says. "Companies like these plan five years down the road, and one thing they're saying is they don't have enough people to fill these opportunities when they win them. We want to think of Prince George's County as a possible pipeline for recruits. I think that's something that is necessary not just for this county, but across the country as well."

Vennard's own experience growing up in Prince George's County informs his dedication to the current generation of students going through the public school system. "My parents always told me that I could go as far as I wanted to," he says. "That I could do anything I put my mind to. But I'm not sure I believed it when I was a kid. In the neighborhood where I grew up, most people

didn't do very well. I didn't have the benefit of knowing someone who worked in an office or who was an executive. Everything in my career has been something that I had not seen before." Exposing children to technology and to the corporate partners of the program, Vennard believes, will have significant and lasting impacts on the county he grew up in.

While Vennard's parents weren't executives, he credits them with imparting his most deeply held values and his work ethic. When Vennard was three years old, his mother married the man who would become his father. "That man adopted me when he married my mom," Vennard says, "and he has been my father ever since. I have to give him a lot of credit. He spent 35 years working for the Postal Service, and I don't remember him ever taking a single day off. When he retired, he had over a year's worth of sick leave. He had that kind of work ethic. No matter what he did, he never made excuses."

Vennard's mother would substitute teach from time to time, but mostly she raised Vennard and his four siblings. When Vennard started working his first job at 14 years old, his mother insisted that he save at least a quarter of his earnings. "I don't save that well today," Vennard laughs, "but it was an invaluable lesson in discipline and managing money."

Vennard's professional life is not the only avenue through which he gives back to his community. An athlete in high school who at one point played semi-professional football and tried out for the Ravens, Vennard has now coached high school students in football and track for seventeen years. "There are many parallels between sports and business," he says. "You have to work hard, and sometimes you lose. It really is about the dedication you show. You practice, you apply yourself to the fullest, and that usually produces a good outcome." But to Vennard, coaching is about much more than an analogy to business. "In many ways," he says, "I care much more about coaching these kids than I do about any awards I might receive in the course of my professional career." Students that Vennard has coached have received full scholarships to schools like University of Missouri and the University of Memphis. "You put so much into these kids," he says, "and hopefully their future is changed. They don't have to pay for college, and at that point their possibilities are endless."

Vennard, himself, attended the University of Maryland at College Park. He worked all four years at various government agencies to pay his own way, and when he graduated with a bachelor's degree in business, he went to work for the Academy for Educational Development. He married his wife of seventeen years, Janelle, at around the same time. It was at her encouragement that he transitioned from an administrative, fiscal position into IT. "I told my supervisor Frank Beadle De Palomo that I wanted to switch to IT," Vennard says, "and he gave me the opportunity to do so. He changed my title to Operations and Technology Coordinator, and that's how I got my start."

After a brief stint as a freelancer, Vennard joined DIGEX, a provider of internet services that was later acquired by WorldCom. Then he transitioned to Electronic Data Systems (EDS), an information technology equipment and services company. "One of my supervisors at EDS was Rob Holder," Vennard says, "and he was the one who brought me in as Chief Technology Officer. At EDS there weren't many minorities in positions of influence. He was one of the few. He really took me under his wing and made sure I'd be successful."

While at EDS, Vennard was approached by a political headhunter. Vennard knew it was for a political campaign, but it was only after he was a few interviews in that he learned he was just a couple more interviews away from becoming Hillary Rodham Clinton's chief technology expert for her presidential campaign. Shortly after, he was interviewing with the former Senator, herself.

"She started by saying flat out that we weren't going to talk about technology in the interview," Vennard recalls, "because I knew way more than she did. We talked about the books I'd read and the movies I'd seen. She was getting a feel for me as a person. I got the job, and it was great to work with her. She's down to earth, personable, and so intelligent."

After the campaign ended, Vennard returned to EDS and then moved on to CherryRoad Technologies, but before long, he would realize that he still had an appetite for politics. He learned that Rushern Baker was running for the Prince George's County Executive seat, and Vennard reached out to him. After organizing a fundraiser and advising Baker on technology issues, Baker appointed Vennard to the

county's IT department.

"There are certain things I still want to accomplish," Vennard says today. "I do want to see the organization mature to the point where it's not dependent on a single person to operate smoothly. We're getting there for sure. There was a time when I couldn't take an afternoon off because something would pop up that would demand my personal attention. But now it's gotten to the point where things will keep operating. When I get to the point where I no longer have a major impact, I think that's when it will be time for me to move on."

In retrospect, Vennard didn't consider himself a natural leader until leadership was demanded of him. "I always thought I was a natural loner," he says. "I was never a follower, but I didn't think I had the desire to lead. It's not something I set out to do, but now I realize that I do have the ability to motivate people to see my point of view. Sometimes I find I need to take a step back to let a discussion take its course, without tipping the scale one way or another. For some things I need to step back and let them develop as opposed to forcing them the way I think they should go."

In advising his own four children who are approaching college-age, and the youth of today who are just graduating, Vennard emphasizes the importance of flexibility. "Youth today need to keep their creativity," he says. "I think the youth have a lot to teach us. As we get older, we're trained to lose our creativity and go with the status quo. But I think that ability to keep that flexible thinking and to see things a different way will benefit us. Young people need to keep their options open. Especially in this world, you don't know what's going to happen in the future. Always be willing to embrace whatever comes."

The final piece of Vennard's giveback to his county and community involves his children, as well. Each holiday season around Thanksgiving, Christmas and the New Year, Vennard, Janelle and their four children make about one hundred lunches that they distribute to the homeless in Prince George's County. "It's important to us that our kids see people who are less fortunate than us," he affirms. "It's a reminder that there are people out there who don't have what we have. That if your circumstances were different, this could be you. It's a reminder to be grateful for what you have, and that you have a

responsibility to help people—in your county, your community, and beyond.”

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