

In *As BIG As It Gets*, Farrell J. Chiles chronicles his tenure as the Board Chair of Blacks In Government (BIG), the leading international organization for African-American public service employees. He presents his experiences, observations, and insight into leading BIG during an unprecedented period of growth. The story begins with his election on the Board of Directors and follows his journey to his election as the Chairman of the Board for five consecutive terms.

### **As BIG As It Gets**

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# As BIG As It Gets

A CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD'S RISE AND TENURE  
AT THE TOP – LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



Farrell J. Chiles

## **Advance Praise for As BIG As It Gets**

“Today on my long trip back from the east coast, I finished reading your manuscript. First, let me say, wow! What a legacy! Your leadership of BIG was transforming. The passion you have for the organization is apparent, and we all know that you can’t have that kind of success without passion for the organization and the people. What I really appreciated was how you skillfully demonstrated the many qualities of a successful leader. You talked about commitment, the investment of time, time away from family, skilled administrative assistants, and the ability to be a pro at networking. I really enjoyed reading it. As I had shared with you, I did not know a lot about BIG. After reading your manuscript, I thought, I really missed out!”

- Loretta Martin, former Chief, United States Probation Department, Los Angeles

“As BIG As It Gets” is an empowerment tool for growing future leaders. A legacy of lessons learned and leadership experiences from a results driven leader – the “One and Only” Farrell Chiles. Documenting your journey and tenure as Chairman of the Board of Directors for five terms will surely set a standard for others to emulate. You set precedence with your service and now with your pen ship. Thanks for the gift of “selfless-service” and volunteerism that is truly “As BIG As It Gets!”

- Amicitia Maloon-Gibson, President, ATIC & MG Center for Excellence

“I believe you hit the “Nail on the Head” with your book. I, being a member of the Board of Directors, can say without a doubt that you were a leader amongst leaders and handled that responsibility very well. I now realize that even with the short time that I spent as the board chair – I needed your support and guidance to manage so many

different personalities. I want to thank you again for your mentorship and friendship.”

- Gary Blackmon, Department of Defense, BIG Chairman of the Board (2008)

“The excerpts are very interesting. Your recount of BIG activities in 2005 evoked some emotion: I remember being impressed with your continued successes when you were re-elected in 2005. I can’t wait to read the rest of the book. I believe “As BIG As It Gets” will be the closest many of us will get to such a powerful experience in Blacks In Government. Thanks for giving me a preliminary view of your story.”

- Cynthia Davis, BIG National Secretary (2003-2007)

“This is as “BIG As It Gets” in Blacks In Government, I felt as though you took me on a voyage in this book. Mr. Chiles, you captured the essence of what it is like to be on top of your game. It’s like a chess game, the ultimate aim in the game is to win by analyzing and overpowering your opponent; and you master that technique. Your book is going to be a “BIG” hit on the book tour.”

- Martha Ervin, Department of the Army

“Yes. This will be good reading for sure. Chapter 8 brought back so many memories! I found myself smiling while reading the Board Chair nominees’ responses to the various questions asked of them and the vote count that followed. I vividly remember your demeanor (poised and confident) and how you effortlessly answered the questions. Thank you for sharing, Farrell.”

- Nancy Tillman, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

“As BIG As It Gets” illustrates passion in leadership and the powerful effects of paradigm shifts. Mr. Chiles has written a very readable book that contains a rich assortment of introspective personal assessments and mature reflections based on practical experiences as a leader. The

contents of this book will serve to inspire and motivate emerging organizational leaders for years to come.”  
- Ida Tyree-Hyche, Department of the Army

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## **Chapter 2: The Beginning 1998 - 1999**

**“Leadership is not about imposing authority. It’s about building relationships, where people are inspired, encouraged, and influenced to follow.” – Dr. Perry W. Thomas, Sc.D**

I first heard of BIG in July 1993. I was employed with the Veterans Administration Medical Center (VAMC) in West Los Angeles as a management analyst. One of my co-workers was Priscilla Martin, a transplant from St. Louis. Priscilla was a former Missouri state employee who had spent time in Washington, D.C. on a special project and was familiar with BIG and at one time belonged to the local St. Louis chapter. She mentioned that the National Training Conference would be in Los Angeles the next month in August. So, I contacted the National Office for information which was faxed to me. I then contacted the VAMC’s training department about the availability of funding to attend the conference. The answer was there weren’t any funds available. However, that did not deter me from attending the conference. I just went and hung out in the lobby, in the exhibit area, and in the Bonaventure Hotel bar. I met wonderful people from all over the country and from different governmental agencies representing a wide variety of governmental occupations and grades. I got to network, have some interesting conversations, exchange information, and enjoy myself. And, there was no cost to me or my agency.

Later, in 1998, I was employed with the Department of Army when a former co-worker of mine, Patricia Ferguson from the VAMC, called and asked me to join a newly formed chapter of BIG - The West Los Angeles VAMC Chapter. She forwarded me an application. Upon reviewing the application, instead of taking out a regular membership, I decided to take out a Life Membership. The cost was \$250.00. In comparison to other organizations in which I held Life Memberships, this was a great deal. So I mailed my application to the National Office

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and with an effective date of March 12, 1998, I had joined and became a Life Member of Blacks In Government.

I worked in Los Alamitos, CA and the chapter was in West Los Angeles, approximately 40 miles away. The chapter held its meetings monthly during lunchtimes. Most of the members were employed by the VA and communicated regularly with each other via the VA's internal e-mail system. Quite frankly, I was out of the loop, which made it difficult to participate in chapter activities.

My agency provided funding for me to attend the 1998 National Training Conference in Washington, D.C. The conference was held at the Washington Hilton hotel located on Connecticut Avenue, NW. I was notified that I would be receiving my Life Membership Plaque at the Opening Plenary Session on that Monday morning. We were seated by regions and chapters in a designated area. I sat next to Joseph Latham, the West Los Angeles VAMC Chapter president. We were the first two members in the chapter to become Life Members. I remember feeling proud walking across the stage to accept my plaque. Afterwards, there were group photos; however, I did not participate in them. Later, I received phone calls from friends who saw me on C-SPAN accepting my plaque. Overall, I really enjoyed the conference. Once again, I met some outstanding people and the networking was excellent.

As far as active participation, Blacks In Government was not one of my priority organizations in 1998. I belonged to the United States Army Warrant Officers Association (USAWOA) and the Reserve Officers Association (ROA) among other organizations. I was a member of the United States Army Reserve. As a matter of fact, I was employed as a military technician at the 63d Regional Readiness Command. It is a civilian, dual status, military technician position, and as a requirement of employment, I had to belong to an Army Reserve unit. Since 1990, I had given a lot of focus to my military career and dual status civilian career. In October 1998, I was awarded the United States Army Warrant Officers Association's CW4 Albert M. Holcombe Memorial Award as the Warrant Officer of the Year. I was the first African-American male to receive the award. In 1994, Mary Carter became the first African American to receive the honor. Mary and I

were founding members of the USAWOA Southern California Chapter in 1993. She became the chapter's first president and went on to serve on the USAWOA Board of Directors from 1994-1997.

In January 1999, I was awarded the Reserve Officers Association's (ROA) Warrant Officer of the Year honor at a luncheon during its annual Mid-Winter Conference at the Washington D.C. Hilton. I was very pleased that my daughter and granddaughter were able to attend a reception. I had the distinction of being the first recipient of the award and the competition was very stiff.

Sometime during the April timeframe, I faxed a press release announcing that I was the winner of the award to the National Office. The next month, I was on temporary duty (TDY) attending a two-week personnel course at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. On a daily basis, I would check my phone messages back at the office and one day I had a message from a Dawn Lawson, who I did not know at the time. I promptly returned the call and Ms. Lawson informed me that the National President has asked her to follow-up with me for a story on my achievement. Ms. Lawson was a member of the National Communications Committee. I was impressed. Dawn interviewed me over the phone and asked me to provide her with a photo and I responded that I would as soon as I returned to California, which I did.

For the 1999 National Training Conference, my agency sponsored three people. I, one other person from Southern California and another from Northern California were selected. The conference was held at the New Orleans Hilton Riverside Hotel. I was still out of the loop as a chapter member and was not a delegate to the Delegates Assembly. As a matter of fact, I did not know about the Delegates Assembly or about any of the organization's politics. I didn't know any National officers and barely the names of the regional representatives. Nevertheless, I networked and began getting to know other BIG members from around the country.

I remember not being able to attend the closing plenary session in the main banquet room and had to sit in the overflow room. The closing plenary session keynote speaker was TV personality and Author Tavis Smiley and he came to the overflow room prior to going to the main room to welcome us and say a few remarks. At the

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conference, the 1999 summer issue of the BIG Reporter was distributed and, low and behold, an article about me appeared in the magazine. The article was not 100% accurate. I was not afforded the opportunity to review it before publication. But it was a good article. I had received national exposure.

Overall, I was impressed with the number of attendees at the conference and their professionalism. Yet after the conference, I went back to California and BIG still was not put on my priority list of organizations.

Patricia Ferguson, my former co-worker at the VA, called and invited me to attend a Region IX Council Meeting in San Diego scheduled for October 1999. The meeting would start on Friday evening with EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) training and the business meeting would start on Saturday morning. I attended the Friday evening training and upon completion, went to my room. From what I heard, several people went to dinner together and the topic of the next day's regional elections came up. People at the dinner were looking for someone to run against the incumbent. Patricia Ferguson suggested me. She knew that I had leadership and people skills and she thought I would make an excellent regional council president. She convinced others at the dinner to ask me to run for the position.

During the first break at the meeting the next day, Donna Thomason, one of the Regional Directors, approached me and gave me the background on the previous evening's dinner discussion and asked me to consider running for Regional Council President. I was not a chapter officer. I was not a regional council representative. I had never read any by-laws. My attendance at the meeting was a response to the request of a former co-worker. I told Ms. Thomason that I didn't believe that I could win. But, if she could gather the votes, then I would accept the nomination. We went back into the meeting and the elections were the next order of business. There was no time to shake hands or sell my candidacy one-on-one. The incumbent president was nominated; the Vice-President was nominated, and I was nominated by the President of my chapter. Each candidate had five minutes to make a presentation. This was the first time that many of the attendees had heard me speak and most knew very little about me. I introduced

myself, gave a verbal resume of my past experiences in leadership positions in other organizations, and asked the representatives to vote for me. I didn't believe that I could win and I didn't. The incumbent was re-elected with 19 votes, I gathered 15 votes, and the Vice-President received 1 vote. I would have won with three more votes. But those three votes were miles away. I went home that Saturday evening and BIG went to the bottom of my priority list of organizations (again).

Then, J.B Larkins entered the picture. J.B. Larkins was at the regional council meeting and was impressed with my presentation. J.B. was serving on the National Board of Directors and was the founder and first president of the Los Angeles/Long Beach Area Chapter. The chapter was once the largest chapter in BIG with a membership of over 360. That number had dwindled down to eight members. The membership was comprised mostly of the employees at the Long Beach Navy Shipyard. Due to the Department of Defense's BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) the shipyard closed and the employees either retired, transferred to other local agencies, accepted positions in other parts of the country, or moved on to other careers (staying in the local area). The chapter had gone south and with only eight members, it was on the verge of losing its charter. J.B. called me at work and asked me to join the chapter and to become its president. He promised me that I would have the support of the chapter membership. I told him that I was willing to consider his proposal and he invited me to have a breakfast meeting at his house on a Saturday in November. I asked him what he would be serving. He said yes and I accepted his invitation.

Six or seven people were at that Saturday morning meeting and J.B. introduced me to those in attendance and then recommended me for chapter president. There were no objections. I was elected unanimously. Everyone appeared to be happy with my decision to take on the leadership role. Perhaps that was the case since they all had the opportunity to assume a leadership role well before I came on the scene, and had not.

My first order of business was to get some of the people in my circle to join the chapter. So, I made phone calls and sent e-mails and within two weeks, the membership had increased to fourteen. The next meeting in December was again a Saturday morning breakfast over J.

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B. Larkins' home (with grits on the menu). I was sworn in as chapter president and my term began in January 2000.

In *As BIG As It Gets*, Farrell J. Chiles chronicles his tenure as the Board Chair of Blacks In Government (BIG), the leading international organization for African-American public service employees. He presents his experiences, observations, and insight into leading BIG during an unprecedented period of growth. The story begins with his election on the Board of Directors and follows his journey to his election as the Chairman of the Board for five consecutive terms.

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