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Alumni Profile



His Firm Foundation

Roddy Jones, who constructed many Raleigh landmarks, believes in building things up, not tearing things down

By Steve Tuttle

Although it happened 33 years ago, Roddy Jones '58 remembers the phone call from Leo Jenkins like it was yesterday. The call from the president of East Carolina came shortly after the UNC Board of Governors had pointedly declined to reappoint Jones to the ECU Board of Trustees, which he had chaired the past two years. "Do you know what those b***** did today?," Jenkins shouted into the phone.

Jones hadn't heard the news but he knew he had irritated university leaders with his strong advocacy for a medical school in Greenville. Bill Friday, who then was president of the nascent UNC system, thought people inside the 16-campus university system should remain neutral in the political debate over a medical school in Greenville. Jones admittedly had become "quite verbose in several newspaper articles" in favor of the medical school.

Jenkins told Jones that the unprecedented move so upset David Whichard, the

Greenville Daily Reflector publisher who sat on the Board of Governors, that he had nominated Jones from the floor for another term, to no avail. ("His removal from the board strikes us as a petty act that is not becoming to the University of North Carolina system," Whichard wrote in an understated editorial the next day.)

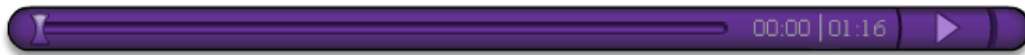
Jones tried calming Jenkins down by putting things in perspective. "If getting kicked off the board of trustees is what I have to do to get the medical school here, then that's a mighty small price to pay," he said flatly.

Such a personal slight would infuriate some people. Others might have vowed revenge. Not Roddy Jones, a tall, lanky man with a quick smile and a soft laugh who only seems interested in building things up, not tearing things down.

Click the arrow below right to hear Jones talk about the phone call from Leo Jenkins.



Roddy Jones with East Carolina President Leo Jenkins at a 1975 trustees meeting just before Jones was "politely kicked off" the board by the UNC Board of Governors.



A well-heeled and politically well-connected Raleigh developer who had built Crabtree Valley Mall and many of Raleigh's finest homes, Jones knew how to handle touchy political situations like this one. He didn't complain; he made it a point to continue supporting higher education across the state by serving on other school boards, including the one at Shaw University. Active in Democratic politics, he continued writing big campaign contribution checks to politicians who put education at the top of their agendas, particularly that newcomer from Wilson, Jim Hunt.

Two years later Hunt was elected governor and Jones was his first appointment to the Board of Governors. He served on the board quietly and diligently for the next 11 years. In 1988 he was elected board chairman, becoming the first person who was not a graduate of UNC Chapel Hill and the first non-lawyer to preside over public higher education in North Carolina. He served on the board for 18 years.

He says he tried to treat everyone fairly and focused on healing bruised feelings. "During my term [as chairman] there was a coming together to be more fair across the system because [until then] it was always the bigger got bigger and the smaller got stepped on. I think we brought some parity there."

To this day he remains diplomatic about East Carolina's sometimes sensitive relationships with UNC Chapel Hill and N.C. State University. "We have to support the two flagship institutions and we recognized that. But [East Carolina] had so much to offer and the state had so much to gain by building up that campus in Greenville. The flagships will continue to get favorable treatment because they are involved in so many things. But things are much more fair now."

He pauses, looks out the window and considers the tectonic changes that East Carolina has undergone over the past 50 years, and his central role in many of those events. "We have established ourselves and achieved the high end of the results we were after," he says simply.

Joining the family business

Roddy Jones knew he had a job waiting for him after college if he wanted it. His father and great uncle had created one of Raleigh's largest construction companies, Davidson and Jones. Founded in 1918, the company had built more than 100 churches

and many of the city's finest homes, including several in the toney Hayes-Barton and Country Club Hills neighborhoods. He did carpentry work for the company most summers and knew how to handle a hammer. His father, Seby Jones, who later was mayor of Raleigh, wanted his son to join the family business.

Jones relished college life and admittedly was something of a party animal. He helped organize the first party raid at East Carolina, in 1956. "These things sound so silly to the kids these days." A geology major, he also was among a small group of students who organized the first fraternities and sororities on campus.



Jones is continuing traditions begun by his father and great uncle, who founded Davidson and Jones.

"Dr. Leo was vice president at that time and Dr. [John] Messick was president, and he was 100 percent against that sort of thing. Dr. Leo told us how to do it [by drafting an innocuous-sounding proposal to the board of trustees that, somewhere down in the fine print, allowed local groups to affiliate with national Greek organizations]. We followed his road map and we got them. We got the board to agree to approve it without the president even knowing it was going to come up." Months later, he and others founded the Sigma Nu chapter on campus. He served as Intra-Fraternity Council president in 1957, his junior year.

Near the end of senior year, his father said it was time to decide on a career. "Dad asked me if I wanted to get into the business, and I said I didn't know. Graduation day, he asked, 'Are you coming into the business or not, I have to know.' I said I would give it a shot. This was a Sunday. He said, 'OK, be in the office tomorrow morning at 7 o'clock.' I said wait, I'm going to the beach tomorrow. He said, 'If you want to give it a shot, be in the office at 7 o'clock.' And I was."

He became an apprentice carpenter. "At that time we were about 50-50, still doing a lot of residential and some commercial work, and I cut my teeth building some of Raleigh's larger homes."

And then disaster struck. "My dad came down with Guillain-Barre Syndrome after I had been out of college a couple of years. He was at home [recuperating] and out of the business for two years. I had to pick it up. So I got a crash Ph.D. in how to run a construction company."

Becoming a major player

Davidson and Jones survived, even thrived, under the 20-something Jones. He put a new emphasis on commercial construction and shifted away from the company's core business of building churches and expensive homes. By the dawn of the 1970s he was ready to take on what then was the biggest construction project in Wake County's history, Crabtree Valley Mall and its more than one million square feet of stores and a high-rise hotel. He became president of Davidson and Jones in 1973 and stayed in that post for the next 20 years.

He was named a distinguished alumnus in 1972, the same year Crabtree opened. He joined the board of trustees in 1973 and was immediately elected chairman, succeeding Robert Morgan. He has remained active and involved in East Carolina affairs ever since. He chaired the fundraising effort for the football stadium expansion in 1977. He created and continues funding several grants and scholarships, including the annual Robert L. Jones Award for Outstanding Teaching and the Robert L. Jones Distinguished Professorship in the School of Music.

He also assumed his father's mantle as a pillar of Raleigh's business and civic communities. He was a founder of Highwoods Properties, a Raleigh real estate development company that went public in 1994 and is traded on the New York Stock Exchange. He served as president of the Carolinas chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America. He served on the boards of trustees at Peace College, Shaw University, Ravenscroft School, and the Babcock School of Wake Forest University. He chaired the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce and was on the boards of the Tammy Lynn Home and the Raleigh Rescue Mission. He was a director of Carolina Federal Savings and Loan Association, NCNB of North Carolina, cement maker Giant Corp. and Carolina Power & Light Co.

In 1983 he was one of the founders of Wake Education Partnership, the first independent local education fund in North Carolina. Using seed money from The Ford Foundation, the organization brought together business leaders and local educators to boost the local school system. He still serves on its board.

"I think I got it beat into me early that you don't just go to work and go home. I think I forgot to say no too many times because I was on too many boards. But I have always enjoyed civic life. I think more

people should do things like that.”

Over the years Raleigh came to appreciate Roddy Jones as head of one of the Big Three families in the construction business. The three families largely built the Capital City as it exists today. Besides the Joneses, there were the Yorks (Willie and son Smedes), who built Cameron Village and other major properties; and the Richards family, who built North Hills Mall.

“We are fortunate he is in here in Raleigh,” says Smedes York, also a former mayor. “He has always been a friend and somebody I could count on. He is responsive and very talented and gets things done. He has created a lot of things that have done good for Raleigh. In many ways, when you look at Raleigh, you’re looking at Roddy Jones.”

Although the Yorks and the Joneses competed in business, they cooperated in numerous civic endeavors. Both families were and remain prominent in progressive Democratic politics.

Jones, who turned 72 this summer, remembers once when competition between the families turned into cooperation, based on nothing more than a handshake. “Several years ago we had some land in Cary and the Yorks had some [adjoining] land in Cary, and we both wanted to build a mall there. Things were getting pretty complicated. And then I remember Willie York proposing a solution: We would build the mall buildings and they would build the service center. Today that’s called Cary Towne Center.”

Going national, coming home

With Roddy Jones pushing hard into commercial real estate development, particularly hotels, Davidson and Jones branched out into several states in the early 1980s, with projects from Ohio to Florida and a branch office in Orlando. But during those boom times many of the company’s most notable projects rose in North Carolina. Jones built Eastland Mall in Charlotte, the Raleigh Civic and Convention Center, the Highwoods office complex in Raleigh, several buildings for IBM in Research Triangle Park and the American Airlines terminal at Raleigh-Durham International Airport. Davidson and Jones built the N.C. Biotechnology Center and the N.C. Microelectronics Center, both in RTP. His personal favorite is the Imperial Center in RTP, an office and hotel complex visible from I-40. Opened in 1984, the Imperial Center and its attached Sheraton hotel still boasts the largest convention facilities in the Triangle.

But then the real estate market abruptly collapsed in the late ‘80s, leaving Davidson and Jones with unsold projects and mountains of debt. Rather than seek the safety of bankruptcy, as many developers did, Jones personally visited each creditor to negotiate resolutions, often swapping equity for debt. In a 1992 interview in Business North Carolina magazine, Jones said those debt workout meetings were devastating to him personally. “When you’re home-grown and have to sit across the table from friends you’ve known a long time, or you’ve known their bosses for a long time, it’s a humbling experience. I don’t think the Lord meant for us to have too much pride, so maybe He has a way of lowering our self-esteem sometimes.”

It took more than two years of 12- and 14-hour days to resolve the company’s debt issues, and Jones was looking forward to better times when, in 1993, he suffered a heart attack. His doctor said it was imperative that he reduce the stress in his life, which led Jones to sell the company to the Beers concern. But he refused to sell the Imperial Center and continues to manage that property.

He didn’t need the heart attack to let him know it was time to slow down. “You know you’ve been working longer than you feel like when the buildings you built are now being torn down. We built the original Civic Center and how it’s been torn down. You build them to stay forever but times change.”

But that’s not the end of the Davidson and Jones story. His son, Robert Davidson Jones ‘94, an industrial technology major, came to him a couple of years ago and said he wanted to revive Davidson and Jones and start building houses again. He agreed and gave his son the same advice he got from his father: “My dad taught me early on to never fall in love with a rooftop. There’s a time to build them and a time to sell them. But people are different. When you make a friend, when you make a commitment, you keep those forever.”

It’s been 50 years since Roddy Jones graduated from East Carolina, and he has remained a true friend of the university ever since. “I celebrated the 50th anniversary in 1957 when I was a student there. I was back there last year for the 100th anniversary. I know that school has been good for me all these years and the friendships I made there. I still see a lot of them. And now I’ve been in this business 50 years.”

As he and every good carpenter knows, a good building starts with a firm foundation.

