

## AT WORK WITH DALLAS HERRING

State Board of Community Colleges

Raleigh, May 17, 2013

Thank you for allowing me to join you in remembering Dallas Herring as part of the Fiftieth Anniversary Observance of the North Carolina Community College System.

At the outset I want to commend Dr. Scott Ralls and his extraordinary leadership team for their stellar leadership and effective service for the community college system. They have remained faithful to the original mission of the system. In the last conversation I had with Terry Sanford about community colleges he said, "Ben, don't forget the poor people." President Ralls still carries on with that request.

It was a joy and high privilege to work with Dallas Herring in the formative years of the program fifty years ago. Dallas Herring was no political fluke of the mid twentieth century as he became the leading North Carolina layman educator for public schools and the establishment of the community college system.

I first heard of Dallas Herring in the early 1950's while I was a graduate student and part time Executive Secretary of the State School Boards Association. He as school board chairman worked with Superintendent O. P. Johnson and became widely recognized for the consolidation of the Duplin County Schools. Governor Luther Hodges, who led the march of North Carolina into the modern era, appointed Herring to the State Board of Education in 1955. Governor Hodges' leadership for economic development became frustrated by the lack of a skilled work force to work in the new industries attracted to North Carolina. Dallas Herring, then Chairman of the State Board Education, picked up the challenge and several industrial education centers were established under local boards of education. Hodges also expressed concern about the inadequacy of the facilities and service the hotel and restaurant business. I think he would be pleased today by the many culinary arts and hospitality programs now offered by community colleges. At the upper end of the job training spectrum the governor developed the now renowned Triangle Research Park and Institute. The original community college plan called for an institution to serve that facility. As the fifty first year of the community college system begins Wake Technical College is building a new campus to serve the Research Park area.

The land mark "Carlyle Study" of education beyond the high school in 1962 fostered by Hodges recommended a program of Community Colleges for North Carolina.

Again Dallas Herring rose to the challenge. He set a team led by I. E. Ready, including Raymond Stone and Helen Dowdy, to work to draft a proposed Community College Law for the State. The Community College Act was passed in 1963, fifty years ago and Ready was named to head the new program. The Act with great foresight held that the institutions would be comprehensive in their program offerings. As Dallas Herring put it, "To be good citizens trained workers should be able to do more than sit on porches and rock on weekends."

My close association with Dallas began in 1965 when I became President of the new Lenoir Community College in Kinston only few miles distant from his home in Rose Hill. He was rather home bound because of the need to care for his disabled mother in their home. He never complained nor flinched in his loving care. One of his enjoyments over a long afternoon and evening was to be picked up and driven around eastern North Carolina visiting schools and colleges talking all the while. We often wound up in Wilmington for seafood. His conversation could be spell binding as he talked of history, philosophy and, yes, politics. On one such intense late evening I ran out of gas returning home and was rescued by a fellow citizen. At his home he enjoyed teaching himself Greek and sharing his knowledge with an occasional schoolboy. He rarely missed the evening WRALTV newscast.

He never let his job get in the way of his work for schools. He was readily available by telephone or for a brief visit at the family business, the Atlantic Coffin and Casket Company and Heritage Design Service. One hapless community college president while waiting to see Dallas observed, "If the termites ever quit holding hands this place will fall down." Dallas overheard and never let him forget it. In addition to management Dallas used his skilled hands for casket and other designs. As he worked his mind was free to contemplate educational matters. I thought his work to be extraordinary and suggested that he was an artist. He objected strongly and always described himself as a craftsman.

Dallas was a person of great dignity. He was small of stature and soft of voice. His piercing eyes were enhanced by glasses in large black frames. His demeanor was

courtly in the presence of ladies. Yet he made it easy for all to address him as Dallas. In an occasional bit of fun he would supplant his usual dark tie with a whimsical bow. He gave up his tobacco pipe in later years. When he made a speech, more properly delivered an address, one feared if his soft eastern Carolina voice could be heard. Yet as his words began to flow his projection strengthened and complete silence fell as his listeners did not want to miss a word. Dallas was agreeable and gracious but one thing did quietly infuriate him. He did not like to be introduced as never married and with no children followed by comments that he was the father millions of school children or that he was "Father of the Community System." Invariably he would lean over to me and growl, "I am not the father of anything." If I were not seated next to him I would watch carefully as he would lean over to someone and I knew what he was saying.

I had not been in Raleigh for many months when I got a call from the head of the South Carolina Technical Center program. He invited Dallas and me to come down to Columbia for a visit and consultations. He said he would send the state airplane to pick us up and return us home. I relayed the invitation to Dallas. His immediate response was, "Tell him to send a mule and cart and I will come." He only allowed aviation programs in the colleges that stopped short of actual flight training.

Dallas continued to enjoy frequent visits with people in his home. He especially savored the opportunity to share his philosophy with new presidents and department staff members. Typically following dinner at a Rose Hill restaurant the person or group would return to his home for long conversations. You were only allowed to call at his front door one time. From then on you called at his back door. He had converted the back porch into his office with a television, easy chair and part of his book collection including a complete set of the North Carolina Colonial and State Records. For repeat visitors there would a bit of an undignified scramble for seats. Dallas sat at a one end of the narrow room with a bright lamp overhead that tended to shine into visitors eyes. The prime guest seat was directly opposite at the other end of the room. Others sat on a sofa with their heads turned left for the sometimes hours long sessions. Many a philosophy and history filled mind left Rose Hill with a stiff neck.

When I became President of Lenoir Community College in 1965 I collected and read as many Dallas Herring speeches as I could find. It was then that I discovered his

stirring statement on "Total Education." He had taken the deadly concept of Total War and turned it into a call to lift people from ignorance. I received his permission to use it as a philosophical mission statement for the first college catalog. It still is a noble expression of what we attempt to do through community colleges. (Copy attached)

In 1970 I agreed to follow Dr. I.E. Ready as Head of the Community System. The decision came only after Dr. Ready personally insisted that it was my duty to serve. I had known Dr. Ready all of my life as my mother taught with him in the Rocky Mount City Schools and later he was her high school principal. I had sought his advice upon embarking on doctoral studies.

My eight years in Raleigh seem a happy blur now of building and creative growth of something new. Dallas served as Chairman of the State Board of Education during most of that period. He pretty well left it up to me and I kept him fully informed. He did not pay much regard to "chain of command" and often went to department staff members directly on matters of interest to him. This did not trouble me as I had observed this practice in his actions with Dr. Ready. Dallas was always willing to help with legislative matters. He was a joy to watch as he recited success stories of students to legislators. He, Dr. Ready and I used to quip privately that had the General Assembly foreseen the eventual enrollment and costs of the system it might have hesitated in 1963. Can you even imagine what North Carolina would be like today if there were no Community College System?

That it does exist and serves some 900,000 annually is a living monument to the leadership and vision of Dallas Herring fifty years ago. Though the Community College System was a mere fourteen years old when Dallas left the State Board of Education the colleges were by then a vital part of the fabric of North Carolina. The comprehensive education concept he advocated was a firmly established reality.

Part of the genius of the United States is that the military is subject to civilian control. I feel that the same applies to education. Just as war is too important to be left up to generals so is education too important to be left up to educators. Dallas Herring used to quip on occasion, "Even a board member has a good idea now and then." So I thank you all for your generous service to North Carolina and the Community College System- and for your good ideas. NOW HERE IS TO THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS! Ben Fountain