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Ron Jones: A veteran negotiator taking reins at chamber

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Around the office, colleagues at the law firm of Clawson and Staubes refer to Ron Jones as the Negotiator, or "Denny Crane," joking references to the Daniel Island attorney's physical resemblance to actor William Shatner. And to the latter's roles as pitch man for Priceline.com and former star of the TV series "The Practice" and "Boston Legal."



Photo by Grace Beahm

A case study in energy, attorney Ron Jones brings his drive to the chairmanship of the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce.



Provided

Jones and wife Lisa at his law school graduation in 1988.



Provided

The Jones family in 2010: son Matthew (from left), daughter Ellen, Lisa and Ron Jones.

There is a similarity, but to the Shatner of 20 years ago, when the one and only Capt James T. Kirk was still prowling the bridge of the Enterprise (on the big screen).

Fitting, since enterprise is Jones' watchword in his newly launched mission as chairman of the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce.

Jones, who assumes the helm July 1, brings all of Shatner's bounding energy to the task, but without the towering ego. Not to say he hasn't his share of self-confidence.

"My mother says I can argue with a door ... and probably win," he says of his negotiating skills. "I come by some of it naturally, although I've also had a lot of training."

Say what you will to Jones. Just don't counsel him to take a powder.

"I have limits, but don't tell me what they are," he says. "Tell me I can't do something and I'll try my best to do that very thing."

Son of a rural mail carrier, the North Carolina native came to Charleston in the early 1990s, lured by Clawson and Staubes' managing partner, Samuel R. Clawson. It was not long before Jones, who heads up the firm's bankruptcy and creditor/debtor rights division, was asked to represent the firm on the chamber. He takes over as chairman in an unusually challenging economic environment, and in a ferociously busy time in his legal specialty as well.

"Among other work with the chamber, I've been involved with the executive committee in several different roles going back to 1998, including a couple of campaigns we ran -- the half-cent sales tax, for one -- and chaired another committee," says Jones, one-time personal assistant to then-U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger (1982-83). "So I'm sort of used to the demands on my time. It will have an effect on my (law) practice. It's not a full-time job at the chamber, but I will be at the headquarters on Leeds Avenue ... a lot."

Charting the course

Jones is well-acquainted with the traits an effective chamber chief must have to succeed, and help others succeed.

"You have to have leadership skills. You have to be able to get along with people and inspire them to get involved, which is a very important part of a volunteer organization like this," he said. "Aside

from the board and the executive committee, the key is to motivate the regular members, to get them interested and keep them interested in some facet of what you have.

"One of the ways to do that is to share your story with them as to what it's meant to you, and help them be realistic about what membership can do for them."

Vice chairman for the past three years, Jones sees his slate get more crowded by the day. This past year, a chief focus was the penny tax for school infrastructure, on which he worked with Patrick Bryant of Go to Team, a video production service, as co-chair.

"That tax passed because people realize schools are our silver bullet," Jones says emphatically.

"That's how we change things. The chamber is dedicated to education. We have to have the facilities where people can actually go to school and not fear for their safety. And they need to be 21st-century schools."

About Ron

Birthplace and date: Washington, N.C., December 1956.

Family: Wife, Lisa; son Matthew; daughter, Ellen.

Education: University of North Carolina, B.A., 1979; George Washington University, M.A., 1981; Campbell University, J.D., 1988.

Sports: Softball (for a number of years), golf.

Hobbies: My wife and I do a little bit of travel, and I need to do more; reading.

Milestone: Lisa and Ron Jones celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary this year.

Chief influences: My father, who I am much like; Sam Clawson; and Howard Chapin, my ninth-grade civics teacher.

What gets you in high gear?: A challenge ... of any kind.

Jones' tenacity is moderated by a genial personality and genuine interest in people, qualities respected by friends and associates.

"Ron is just a terrific person," says Mary Graham, the chamber's senior vice president for public policy and regional advancement. "He is always willing to roll up his sleeves and help work on an issue, and he always keeps a terrific sense of humor. Even if you are working on a project that may be frustrating, Ron will find a way to share a funny story and make everyone involved laugh."

Although as an attorney he works principally as a debtor-creditor specialist, with an emphasis on representing creditors such as banks, Jones performs his share of pro bono work, representing consumer debtors when this is not in conflict with his primary role.

"I was a volunteer counsel for Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corp. in their Chapter 11

bankruptcy case -- a long two-and-a-half year deal for me," Jones recalls. "None of my bank clients were involved. We paid almost 80 cents on the dollar for the debts, restructured the ones we did not pay off, paid the employees the same sort of dividend, and more after the bankruptcy was complete. That is the single most important professional achievement of my life."

Tar Heel born

Jones took the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) after his junior year at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, but upon graduation in the fall of 1979 decided to go to Washington, D.C., to find work. It was not long before he enrolled at George Washington University, where he would earn a master's degree in special studies (public policy concentrating on Congress). His classes, however, were taught on Capitol Hill in the Library of Congress.

The program was designed for Hill staffers to get a master's in legislative affairs, and Jones went through it in half the time as his classmates, eager to land a job.

Attending graduate school at night and "peddling resumes" by day, Jones parlayed his experience working in the libraries at UNC in his junior and senior years into a similar (temporary) job in the library of the Supreme Court.

"At the end of that 90-day job, the personnel officer at the court let me apply for a job in the office of the Reporter of Decisions," Jones recalls. "I learned some paralegal and cite-checking skills and actually proofread justices' opinions and made suggestions for changes before they were published. I did that for close to two years -- graduating from GW in the meantime -- then began to think: 'Do I want to go back home and go to law school? Or do something different?'"

Jones was leaning toward the latter, when he was approached by the office manager for the chief justice.

"I was one of four or five people they had in mind as a personal assistant, and was interviewed. Several weeks went by and I was sitting in my office at the Reporter of Decisions when I got the call to come to the justice's chambers. I met him and started working for him as his personal assistant the next day."

Jones' anecdotes from that time are legion, yet eventually he did depart the nation's capital for home, taking up residence in Western North Carolina to attend law school at Campbell University in Buies Creek. He earned his law degree on 1988, passing the bar exam that same year.

A few years later, Clawson beckoned. Or rather, insisted. He's glad he did.

"On a professional level, I am very proud to be associated with Ron," Clawson says. "He is an outstanding civic leader and a gifted attorney. On a personal level, I value him as a close friend and confidant. His strong work ethic and high personal standards have brought him success in every facet of his life -- despite his Tar Heel roots (just teasing, Ron)."

Tar Heel bred

There are mementoes of Campbell University and George Washington scattered about Jones'

office at Clawson and Staubes. But these are dwarfed by the collection of souvenirs and sports memorabilia associated with his other alma mater, UNC.

One photo of which he is especially proud depicts the UNC basketball team visiting the U.S. Supreme Court in 1983. Shown within are legend-in-the-making Michael Jordan, future Tar Heel head coaches Bill Guthridge and Roy Williams, and a very young looking Jones, then in his capacity as assistant to the chief justice.

More importantly, this eastern-bred North Carolinian ultimately wed a woman of Western North Carolina stock named Lisa, bridging that great yawning chasm between two schools of barbecue in vehement opposition. Now that's negotiating.

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