

A Tale of Two South Carolinas

By [Dan Cook](#)

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Driving onto the island of Hilton Head last Friday, I couldn't help but think about the irony and awkward symbolism of what I was about to do.

I was headed to a conference called One South Carolina, a project of the Riley Institute at Furman University. The theme of this year's conference was "Remembering the 'Forgotten South Carolina,'" a reference both to our state's extraordinary disparities and to the excellent "Forgotten South Carolina" series by Doug Pardue in the Post & Courier that explored those disparities in depth.

Just one example: South Carolina now sits at No. 3 on the list of most poverty-stricken states. Almost one-fifth of state residents live under the poverty line; among single-parent families, 44 percent live in poverty.

And yet, here I was, driving into the land of pristine golf courses, gated communities and restricted beach access — a part of South Carolina that many of its residents will never see at all, or perhaps only from behind a hotel maid's service trolley.

Despite the jarring optics, the conference itself was positive, hands-on and substantive. Conference participants attend as graduates of the Riley Institute's Diversity Leaders Initiative, a professional training program that teaches business and community leaders how to tap the full range of talent and perspectives around them, as well as how to effectively work toward sustainable improvements in their communities. (I was there as a Leo Twigg's Scholar and current member of the Diversity Leaders Initiative.)

Participants come with a single goal in mind: How can we all work together to solve South Carolina's problems?

Ken May, director of the S.C. Arts Commission, led a panel discussion about the enormous role the arts have in our state's economy and the impact they've had as catalysts for reviving moribund downtowns in several cities.

David Brancaccio, host of NPR's Marketplace, talked about three cities that are innovating in education, entrepreneurship and health care to help reduce inequities in their communities. One of his case studies involved a bank in North Dakota that invests all of its profits back into its community through grants.

Don Gordon, director of the Riley Institute, compared South Carolina to Singapore, noting that both were colonies of Great Britain, and they share a similar population base (South Carolina at just below 5 million; Singapore just above it) and number of children (roughly 1 million). Yet Singapore

ranks near the top of international education statistics. South Carolina? Not so much. That despite the fact, Gordon said, that Singapore has drawn at least some of its inspiration from a South Carolinian: former Gov. Dick Riley, who also served as secretary of education under Bill Clinton.

But the message of One South Carolina really resonated when Charles Bolden — NASA administrator, astronaut and graduate of Columbia's C.A. Johnson High School — took the podium on Sunday.

Though Bolden had pages of notes in front of him, he rarely referred to them. Instead, he spoke from the heart about his extraordinary life's journey; his expectations for what lies ahead in space exploration; and his hopes for his home state. He joked with two young girls in the front row, saying that the younger sister might one day watch the older one go to Mars. He talked about his friend and mentor, Ron McNair, who died in the 1986 Challenger disaster. He talked about his parents and how they'd raised him to never sell himself short. He spoke eloquently of the need to think and act not in terms of what's best for ourselves, but what is best for our grandchildren.

He also directly addressed a theme that had been something of the elephant in the room at the conference: the role of state government.

A handful of state legislators were at One South Carolina. But for the most part, as issues from teen pregnancy and health care to poverty and education were discussed, the unspoken understanding in the room was: We have to do this ourselves, because the state will not be there to help.

Bolden brought a slightly different message: You must do everything you can, and you must also hold your leaders accountable.

“You can't stop, and you can't let state government off the hook,” Bolden said, adding that it's important for a state's business leaders to advocate for its educational needs.

Progress is possible. Though it's poverty ranking is wretched, South Carolina has made some hard-fought progress in other areas. The state's high school graduation rate is 77.5 percent, up 2.6 percent from last year, and its teen pregnancy rate is at an all-time low.

But too often, our elected officials are not partners in that progress, prioritizing tax cuts for comfortable South Carolina homeowners over modest investments in education and effective social programs that more than pay for themselves by reducing long-term societal burdens.

On the way back from Hilton Head, I opted not to take the interstate, driving instead through Allendale, Hampton and Bamberg counties, past small towns like Estill, Gifford, Sycamore, Govan and Denmark — towns that struggle to retain jobs and residents. I drove past cotton fields; past crumbling barns, gas stations and restaurants; past Sons of Confederate Veterans signs, small-town churches and ice-felled trees.

It's not a long distance from Hilton Head to Allendale, but it was a journey from One South Carolina to the other one — the forgotten one. And it reminded me of why I'd gone to the conference in the first place.

The people in Estill, Gifford, Sycamore, Govan and Denmark — or in Gov. Haley's hometown of Bamberg, for that matter — aren't looking for anyone's pity or sympathy. They don't need One South Carolina graduates or state legislators to tell them how to improve their lives.

What they are looking for is a fair shot at improving their lives themselves — the tools to thrive where they are, or to transcend where they are, as Charles Bolden has. We owe it to them, and to our state's future, to do all we can to give them that opportunity — with our state's elected leaders when possible, and without them when necessary.