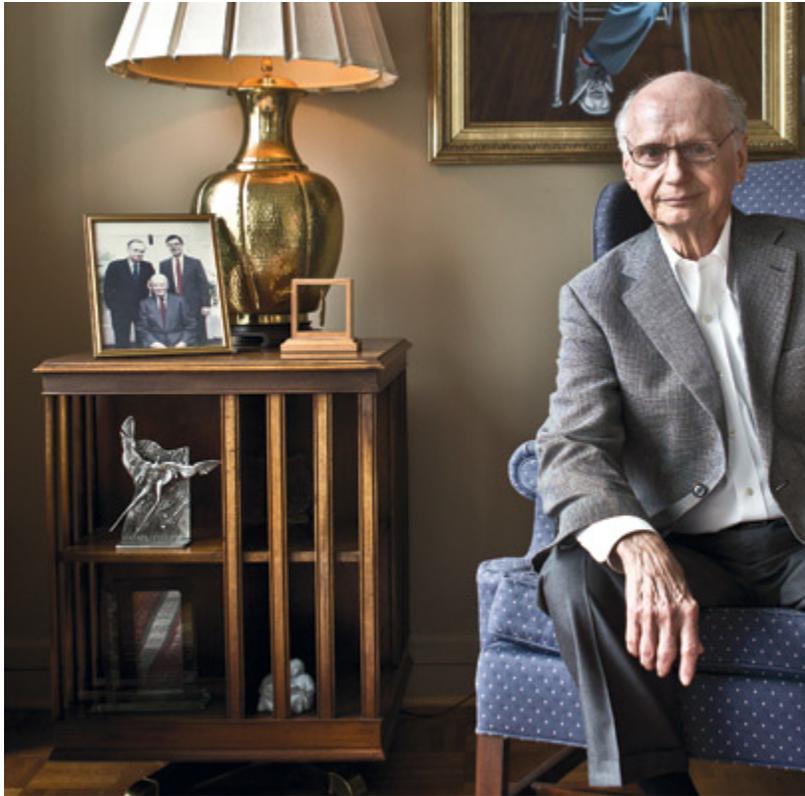


The Talented Mr. Riley

Richard W. Riley has a knack for being chosen.



By Jac Chebatoris
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Richard W. Riley has a knack for being chosen.

After all, the former South Carolina governor and United States secretary of education was, among other things, the co-captain of his football team at Greenville High School. This, despite Riley's confession: "I was not the star player at all." Ever humble, one thing's for sure of the decorated statesman, advocate, and recipient of the 2012 Lifetime of Charitable Giving Award:

He deserves a gold star.

Over a cup of English breakfast tea on one of those still-summery first days of autumn, inside an office high in the City Hall building in downtown Greenville, Dick Riley, former governor of South Carolina and secretary of education under President Bill Clinton, reflects on his auspicious youthful endeavors: "I took piano as a young guy and joined the Woodside Music Club," says Riley. "I played in the recital, and I wasn't any star pianist," he continues, "but I got elected president of the Woodside Music Club. That was in the sixth grade. I went to Greenville High, and I was co-captain of the football team—and I was not the star football player at all. And I thought, for some reason I can get chosen, and maybe I'm better

Photo Gallery



at that than anything else,” he laughs. “I did observe that my most successful thing was getting elected.” An astute observation, indeed, by the man for whom the state’s Constitution was changed so that he could serve a second term as governor.

Yet anyone who knows Riley understands that the self-effacing way in which he tells this anecdote reflects his tendency to deflect praise, despite his myriad accomplishments.

Richard Wilson Riley is 79, and had a 50-year-long marriage which produced four children and 14 grandchildren. There are three institutions named in his honor: the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership at his alma mater, Furman University, the Richard W. Riley College of Education at Winthrop University, and the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University in Naples, Florida. To list every board, commission, and organization for which Riley has either chaired, is on, or has been involved in would use up the remaining real estate of this page. And, he’s got one of the best laughs in politics. Maybe that is because he also has a great sense of humor—about himself, which is a rarified quality in humans, let alone high-level governmental humans.

It is not, however, his staggering accolades or his six degrees of separation to Washington’s power players (President Bill Clinton is still a very close personal friend) by which we are dazzled. Rather it is his consistency in being an exceptional example of fair-mindedness in politics, public service, and civic responsibility, and an exemplary ambassador for many of those who never even got his vote. They never got his vote because they weren’t even born yet. But the children and their education were—and still are—the heart of Riley’s doggedness.

“Dick Riley’s commitment to South Carolina’s children, and to our nation’s children,” says Joe Waters, associate director at the Institute for Child Success, an education advocacy organization in Greenville, “is incredible not only for its depth, but for its longevity. For the better part of the last half-century, Secretary Riley has been a committed public servant and advocate working to ensure that every child born in South Carolina and across this country has a fair opportunity to succeed in school, in the workforce, and to contribute to a prosperous society. He is an inspiration to all of us who strive to make our own contributions to a brighter South Carolina because he has shown us that we must remain committed to this cause over the course of a whole career, not just for a season of life.”

Riley graduated from Furman in 1954 and then served in the U.S. Navy for a year on a minesweeper christened the *Orleans Parish*. As they sailed down the mighty Mississippi to tie up in New Orleans, Riley’s talent for being elected came to pass again. “It was Armed Forces Week, and the crew voted me to escort Miss New Orleans,” he says with a smile traced with the most subtle wash of mischief. “So I am this young officer in the Navy and have this beautiful woman that I was forced to go out with for three days. And she would stay up late, and I’d have to work during the day, and it almost killed me trying to keep up with her,” he says, laughing. But it was Florence native, Ann “Tunky” Yarborough who captured his heart, and they married in 1957. Tunky, who was a stalwart supporter of both her husband and his efforts for educational reform, remained his biggest advocate until her death in 2008. She famously sat in the first row of the state Senate, even while going through chemotherapy, during the debates over passing her husband’s Education Improvement Act.

After graduating from the University of South Carolina School of Law in 1959, Riley was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1962, then to the state Senate in 1976. He ran for governor in 1978, and then won re-election in 1982 with nearly 70 percent of the vote. Clinton tapped him to

become United States secretary of education in 1992 until 2001 (a post he almost didn't have, had the department actually been shut down by the previous administration, as was considered).

During Riley's 1983 gubernatorial inauguration speech, he mentioned a young couple from Cheraw, South Carolina, and their baby boy, John Christopher Hayes, who had been born just two days earlier. Riley spoke of him, as politicians do, to make a personal connection to the audience. It's an effective device for a speech, but in Riley's hands, it was also a reflection of his integrity: He made clear that education and working are not just "goals, but birthrights for all the John Christopher Hayeses in the state that year in 1983"—and he went one further and invited John Prentiss Hayes to attend the Governor's Inaugural Ball, where the proud father was greeted with applause when his name was announced. That "baby," the elder Hayes says from his home in Cheraw, "is now 6' 1" and almost 30 years old." (*And, Mr. Secretary, his progress report: He went on to complete two years at Francis Marion College.*)

Riley is racking up one more testament to his continued civic commitment as this year's recipient of the Lifetime of Charitable Giving Award given by the Community Foundation of Greenville (with *TOWN Magazine* and the *Greenville Journal*). "I don't know a person who deserves this award more than he does," says Grier Mullins, executive director of Public Education Partners, a nonprofit that supports public schools in Greenville, and who, as a child growing up in the same neighborhood as the Rileys, remembers Riley's beloved wife knocking on doors to raise awareness to keep Augusta Circle Elementary School from being shut down. "My first memory of them was as being real education advocates always looking out for kids.

Improvement in any area, generally speaking, is no simple task. Under the rubric of education, it becomes an even greater challenge. But Riley sees the challenge as an enticing, invigorating invitation to prove one's mettle in striving for excellence.

The Education Improvement Act in 1984 during his second term as governor set a bar as to what can be done with such dedicated perseverance.

"That was the star of my crown as governor," says Riley, "and I was very proud of that and still am. The RAND Corporation [a nonprofit global think tank] said it was the most comprehensive and effective school reform—back then, 'school reform' was a new term in the country—and it involved a 1-percent sales tax increase. It involved 50 different programs to deal with special needs and special problems. We debated it for 14 weeks, sometimes on weekends, sometimes all night, and it was really quite a fight." A fight he won with empirical results that reflected why he had fought so hard: test scores increased; SAT scores soared.

"At one measure, it was up 65 points for black kids, and 45 points for everybody," says Riley. "Everybody was improving. And that was the big thing. The big thing was public support. And then people started filling up the PTA meetings, and parents were getting very much involved. They started school-improvement councils."

Riley and President Bill Clinton became governors (for South Carolina and Arkansas, respectively) on the very same day in 1979, and their friendship has endured through the years since then. Not too many people tell Bill Clinton "no," but Riley did, rather monumentally, at least twice: once in 1993 when Clinton asked him to join the United States Supreme Court, and again in 1996, the day after Clinton was

re-elected for a second term, and he asked Riley to become his chief of staff, a position that Riley explains is described as being the second most powerful position in the world after the U.S. president but also, “a bear of a job.” A man with a less-intact ego might have just taken it and ran, but Riley told Clinton he could best serve his presidency and the country by remaining secretary of education.

Our former governor, to be sure, is not one to rest on his illustrious laurels. Hell, he’s not one to rest, which is probably why at nearly 80-years-old, he’s still as sharp as a No. 2 pencil on the morning of the SATs. If he’s not in Greenville, where he is a senior partner at the national law firm of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough, which has offices along the East Coast, then he might be traveling to places like New York City (in September, he was part of a panel moderated by *NBC Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams for Education Nation 2012, a live-broadcast conversation about improving education in America), Washington D.C. (he is the senior partner in his law firm’s wholly-owned subsidiary called EducationCounsel, which is based in D.C.), Cincinnati (he’s on the board of Knowledge Works, an education foundation), or Iowa City (he’s on the board of ACT, headquartered there). His eyes spark as he discusses the “fascinating” new modalities in school design, such as Learning Studios: “Part of the concept is to bring in people who are not teachers, but are experts in the subject,” he says. “They’re doing that in Maryland with NASA, so they’ll bring in astronauts to teach math and science, and the students love that. Or they’ll bring lawyers in to teach about government or the legal system.” Or, what’s known as New Tech High Schools—a high-school design that Riley explains is “learning in a different way; learning by doing.” There are more than 100 of them in the country, he says, one of which is in Sacramento. “This was 10th grade geometry, and how were they doing it? They were laying out a golf course, and it’s fascinating,” he says. “They have golf people there working with them, and they’d go out and visit [the golf course] and learn angles, and the kids’ eyes are sparkling.” As his are, as he explains what he sees as great potential in the blend of traditional methods of teaching with these innovative ways.

When he’s home in Greenville, he starts nearly every day with 30 minutes of exercise. “Unfortunately,” he says laughing, “the name of the video is *Walk Away the Pounds*, and then, patting on his oxford where a vacancy of flesh lies beneath, adds, “I’m not a fat guy, but my wife Tunky and I did that for years, and I got one for Betty, and she does it at her house.” “Betty” is Betty Farr, Riley’s girlfriend of the past year (and the winner of this year’s Benevolent Spirit Award). Mr. Secretary, still with boyish exuberance, slides over a clipping of a recent photo of the pair from the 125th anniversary celebration of Greenville High, explaining that she was a cheerleader and he co-captain of the football team when they both attended high school there.

Riley is as engaging as he is still engaged, his legacy a yardstick—in 2009, *TIME Magazine* named him one of the Top 10 Best Cabinet Members in our nation’s history—by which we can measure our own efforts to preserve his work.

“When you’re with him in public, no matter what the situation is,” says his former neighbor, Mullins, “there’s just a line of people that want to speak with him, and it happens everywhere he goes. I feel kind of sorry for the other people involved in any program or any event, because people are going to stand in line to speak to Dick Riley.”

They should take heart in their efforts as just one more example of Riley’s own mantra: “If there’s something you believe in, you never lose,” he says, “You might be delayed, but you never lose.”