

Tar Heel of the Year

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The Goodnights: Tar Heels of the Year

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TAR HEELS OF THE YEAR

1997: Hugh McColl

CEO of NationsBank

1998: John Hope Franklin

historian

1999: Franklin Graham

missionary

2000: Larry Wheeler

director of the N.C. Museum of Art

2001: Molly Broad

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UNC system president

2002: Kay Yow

N.C. State women's basketball coach

2003: Jim Goodman

CEO of Capitol Broadcasting

2004: Howard Manning Jr.

Wake County Superior Court judge

2005: Martin Eakes

CEO of Self-Help Credit Union

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Now Jim, 63, talks to countless reporters each year and speaks all over the world. Ann, 61, sits on six business and education boards and is co-chairwoman of N.C. State University's capital fundraising campaign. They have become the most prominent donors at the N.C. Museum of Art. And both speak forcefully about their commitment to education reform.

They say they want to build a region that thrives on knowledge, where cutting-edge schools turn out workers whose ideas fuel high-tech, high-profit companies. They want their grandson to grow up in a state where more than two-thirds of students graduate from high school, a country where high-tech companies don't have to import engineers from Asia, an economy built on more than service jobs.

But ask about their personal lives, and a door closes.

The News & Observer interviewed about two dozen friends, acquaintances and former employees, and few knew details about the Goodnights' upbringing or private lives.

Even their children know little about their parents' backgrounds. Their second daughter, Susan Ellis, 36, explains that her parents left their roots behind when they started their lives in Raleigh.

"I wish I could say they talked about their childhoods, but they didn't," Ellis said. "They came to Raleigh -- that's really where they see their life as beginning. It was never easy to go back home."

Jim offers only the barest sketch of boyhood. He was reared in Greensboro until he was 12. His father was a manager for a business that home-delivered groceries. When he was 12, his family moved to Wilmington, where his father owned a hardware store and Jim worked long hours.

He said his parents were deeply disappointed when he didn't take over the family business. Neither understood his work with computers.

He had one sister, Cordelia, seven years older, with whom he says he was never close. Neither she nor his parents are living.

Asked for more details, he becomes stone-faced. He mumbles a few vague tales of fishing with his father, hunting rabbits at his grandfather's house.

Jim says later that the public sees enough of him, that his personal life is his business: "I don't want to get down to that level."

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What inspired him to take on a more public role, after years of insulating himself? "I just realized it was good branding for SAS."

Why has he spent millions building a collection of paintings? "It's just an investment. Once it appreciates, we'll give it to the museum and get our money back in taxes."

Ann readily offers the basic outlines of her childhood. She grew up with two older brothers in Lillington and Fayetteville and was reared by a mother who stayed at home. Her father, a real estate agent, was a gregarious man and widely known.

She enrolled at Meredith College in Raleigh in 1963 and while there met an NCSU senior named Jim Goodnight. Three years later, she transferred to N.C. State and they married. No one knew what software was in those days.

She describes a marriage of simple routines that have changed little over the years: reading the paper over breakfast, lunching together when they can, hashing out the day's events each night. Neither she nor her husband allows outsiders to scrutinize their 43-year relationship.

"I feel we've both grown," Ann says and changes the subject.

Many say that wealth hasn't changed the Goodnights.

"They're still the most humble people," said their oldest daughter, Leah Goodnight, 38. "They live extremely simply. Dad still takes the big trash bags every other day to SAS. They go to Sam's Club."

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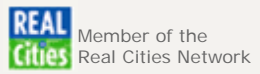


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