

James Andrew Harrell Sr. '44

Not just a citizen of Elkin, but also the mayor. Not just a member of the First United Methodist Church, but the lay leader for the entire Western North Carolina Methodist Conference. Not just a dentist, the North Carolina Dentist of the Year in 1984. Not just a fellow of the American College of Dentists, the president. Not just a member of the North Carolina Dental Society, the president. Not just a savings account depositor, a founder of the Yadkin Valley Bank and Trust. And not just a life member of The University of North Carolina General Alumni Association, one who has served as member of the board and President.

Difficulties in reaching the final goal have never daunted Jim Harrell. When he finished at Carolina in 1942, there was no dental school so he went to the Medical College of Virginia. When he became mayor of Elkin, many of the town's World War II vintage facilities were wearing out, so he oversaw construction of the town's first round-the-clock fire station, townwide water and sewer system, library, airport, recreational park, and the James A. Harrell Water Treatment Plant. When he visited Jesus College, one of the colleges composing Oxford University, during the celebration of the 200th anniversary of one of the Methodist Church's founding events, he learned that the college lacked a portrait of its graduate, Bishop Thomas Coke. Coke, along with Francis Asbury, got the Methodist Church started in America. Harrell returned to North Carolina and raised the money necessary to commission the portrait of Coke, now hanging at Jesus College beside alumnus Harold Wilson (former prime minister) and T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).

That's the kind of undaunted determination that Jim Harrell exhibited even as a youngster. In the 1930's he was an end on his high school football team and wanted very much to catch a touchdown pass. His chance came on a long pass thrown in a game against Mocksville on the Mocksville field. There was a difficulty, however. The Mocksville field was only 90 yards long. The end of the field abutted a wall of the gymnasium. When a team crossed the 50-yard line, the officials would move the ball back 10 yards to allow for the extra space needed. Jim knew he had a problem as he streaked down field. At the end of his run he would have covered only 90 yards. His solution: when he crossed the goal line he opened the gym door and ran 10 more yards inside. Touchdown!

He brought that kind of determination to Carolina in 1940 and by 1945 had received his dental degree. Except for stints in the Navy at the end of World War II and again in the Korean War, Jim has practiced dentistry in Elkin continuously since then. On the wall of his office is a framed photograph of Dean Smith and himself. His dental chair and the carpet on the floor are Carolina blue.

In 1977, Jim received the first Distinguished Service Award presented by the UNC School of Dentistry and the Dental Foundation, and in 1986 he was honored with the second John C. Brauer Award, given by the UNC Dental Alumni Association to the select few people who have been of the greatest service to the School of Dentistry at Chapel Hill. The Brauer Award recognized his service as president of the Dental Foundation of North Carolina and one of the first affiliate and life members of the dental alumni association — all from an alumnus of another dental school.

“I don't particularly enjoy politics,” former mayor Harrell once said. “Sometimes you would get in the middle of a controversy and wonder, ‘What in the world am I doing in this mess?’”

Jim Harrell's in another mess today — a mess of servants of the University, and it is a pleasure to count him as one.