

James Gooden Exum, Jr. '57

How many times can one man be first? Jim Exum is pushing that question to its limits.

He was valedictorian of his high school class in Snow Hill. He was one of eight young men in the first class of Morehead Scholars at Carolina. He was president of Phi Beta Kappa, a sort of first among firsts. His classmates elected him permanent president of the class of '57. The law school faculty at NYU (where he attended on a full scholarship) voted him its highest award for distinction in scholarship and character. He was elected to the North Carolina General Assembly on his first try, at age 30, and later that same year, 1967, he became the youngest North Carolina Superior Court judge on record when he was appointed by Governor Dan Moore. And eight years later, in 1975, elected to the state Supreme Court, he became the second youngest person ever to sit on that lofty bench.

Only *second* youngest? No doubt, he missed being first by only a few months.

And he was the first one to the fire.

That night in 1962, Jim Exum, a young lawyer, newly arrived in the big city of Greensboro at the start of what was to prove to be only a six-year career in active law practice, was out late visiting a friend. He heard screams and saw the fire across the street. The man in the yard was in shock. Lawyer Exum ran to the back of the house and saw a little boy (who proved later to be six years old), out on the roof, screaming, "Get me down, get me down." As Jim scrambled up the ladder, the boy screamed, "My sister's in there, she's in the crib." Climbing in the back window, Jim felt his way through the smoky room, touched the crib, grabbed up the little girl, and carried her out. The deputy fire chief in charge of the scene said, "This man saved their lives."

In 1986, at age 50, Jim Exum was elected Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, a position he now holds, to the great benefit of the people of North Carolina. In one respect, that campaign must have been unusual for him: his opponent, an able and respected jurist in her own right, was a year *younger* than he was.

Jim Exum is a credit to this University, which he has served ably as a director of the General Alumni Association, as the GAA's vice president, and, in 1987-88, as our president, and which he has served as a member of the Morehead Foundation's Central Selection Committee, as vice chairman of the Board of Visitors, and as a member of the search committee that recommended Paul Hardin as chancellor. As his long-time friend and companion on the North Carolina Supreme Court, Willis P. Whichard '62, sums it up: "Jim's love for the University is a natural by-product of his scholarly instincts and his genuine concern for people."

We are all a little awed by a life of such accomplishments in one still so young, but seemingly always first!