

## Howard Nathaniel Lee '66

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Howard Lee got off to an inauspicious start with Carolina.

A young Army soldier and fledgling poet in the early 1960s, Howard was looking for journals, magazines and other outlets to publish his work. He learned about the UNC Press and submitted some poems. They were rejected.

Luckily for UNC, especially now that Howard is a four-term state senator and co-chairman of the powerful higher education appropriations committee, he doesn't hold a grudge.

In fact, it is only through an odd twist of fate that Howard ever crossed paths with Carolina after that early rejection. A Georgia native and graduate of Fort Valley State College, he was working as a juvenile probation officer after his honorable discharge from the military. He was planning to get his master's degree in social work from the University of Georgia, when, quite by chance, he struck up a conversation with Frank Porter Graham '09 at a Savannah reception. "You ought to try a real university," Graham quipped, and Howard took up his invitation.

Howard arrived by bus in Chapel Hill knowing little about the University – or even how to find it from the corner of Franklin and Columbia streets. But by the time he'd earned his master's from the School of Social Work in 1966, he had forged a special bond with UNC – he had been an eyewitness to its contributions to the state, nation and world.

That relationship was tested – and matured – after he was elected mayor of Chapel Hill in 1969. One of the first African-Americans to win a mayoral race in a predominantly white Southern town since Reconstruction, Howard was no stranger to such groundbreaking integration achievements – he'd already broken the color line at the School of Social Work when his classmates twice elected him president of their student association.

Howard assumed the mayor's office at a turbulent time for town-gown relations. Campus protests over civil rights and the Vietnam war regularly spilled onto Chapel Hill streets. Town residents had begun to chafe at the long-dominant role played by the University in local politics, planning, utilities, housing, parking and transportation. Howard likened the relationship between UNC and Chapel Hill to that of parent and child—and he wanted the town to grow up.

While some may have seen those growing pains as signs of discord, those who worked closely with him during those years understood the benefits of Howard's calls to "sever the umbilical cord." Ferebee Taylor '42 and Bill Friday '48 (LLB), who spent many hours in private discussions and late-night meetings with Howard, credit him with enabling Chapel Hill and Carolina to become true partners. That work earned Howard induction into the Order of the Golden Fleece in 1976.

Howard's true love and respect for UNC became evident when, after serving as secretary of the N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, a year as administrative assistant to the School of Social Work dean, and four years there as a lecturer, he emerged from private enterprise in 1991 to win a 16th District state senate seat.

"As a legislator, he has never failed to advocate and defend the University," Bill Friday says. "And now, with his powerful role, he is truly an effective advocate of how we educate. He is truly a friend of the University."

His decision to champion UNC – "to step up, stand out and fight," as Howard puts it – was a recognition of the University's need for a legislative ally. Convincing other legislators to respond to the new pressures and challenges facing the state's flagship university has required him at times to muster all his powers of persuasion and political maneuvering. Howard has chalked up some impressive victories for the campus, including either sponsoring or playing key roles in passage of increased budget flexibility, reversion of unspent budget allocations, and enhancing faculty salaries.

His senate colleague Tony Rand '61 says, "Howard is a powerful advocate for a better North Carolina. And he realizes that for there to be a better North Carolina, one of the foundations has to be a university system that continues to show to the rest of the country the emphasis we put on the minds of our young people."

Howard has also remembered the School of Social Work, steering a \$9 million windfall toward construction of the Tate-Turner-Kuralt building.

His guiding principle has been to review all the available information, then fight for what he believes is best for the University. He lets his integrity and his conscience guide him, not mislaid allegiance. As Howard says, "Friendship, for me, ends where my public responsibility begins."

His friend Dean Smith says, "Howard's contributions are immeasurable. He is a real friend of education, and as three-term mayor of Chapel Hill, and as state senator, he has worked tirelessly on behalf of our community, students, faculty and staff. His continued dedication and commitment will help ensure that our University continues its tradition of excellence in education as we enter the 21st century."

Perhaps we misjudged a great poet. But Howard Lee has been poetry in motion for the General Assembly, the town of Chapel Hill, and Carolina.