

James Baxter Hunt Jr. '64 (LLBJD)

On a late spring afternoon twenty years ago, when Jim Hunt was just warming up as North Carolina's governor, he took a side trip while on business in the mountains, to a high school baseball game in Polk County. The bleachers were full, and he was there to see the visiting team anyway, so he just stood behind the backstop.

Those in the crowd who thought the governor was just making a quick appearance on a day filled with appointments were surprised when he stayed to watch the team from his old high school for the entire game. Someone finally asked him, politely, if he didn't have more pressing business.

The governor said, well, perhaps so, "But this is Rock Ridge!"

In a life of public service that has taken him across the state and across the world, he always is drawn to home, to the farm and the small towns and Rock Ridge High School, and to the lives and issues of ordinary North Carolinians. He was chosen the outstanding member of his high school class, but soon after he started college he found himself struggling with the same courses that seemed to be a breeze for classmates from city schools.

From the beginning of his lifetime of leadership, Governor Hunt's primary focus has been education, and his tireless efforts to improve the quality of teaching, the quantity of learning, and equitable opportunity in our public schools will be felt at this University and others for a long time.

Although we can't rule out the possibility that he will return in 2004 and serve another eight years, his 12 years as governor have firmly established a progressive course for the state and have shown a skeptical public the good that government can do.

Governor Hunt was bound for public life as far back as anyone can remember. His parents taught him that it was an honorable path, and by the time he entered N.C. State University, he was amazing and often frustrating his friends with his devotion to campus causes. He was student body vice president by the time he was a sophomore, then he served two years as president.

Says close friend Phil Carlton, "He was way ahead of his time on the issues. He was born with it in his bones, and he had the fervor for education way back then. He has carried through on it."

It's not easy to be brief in assessing the governor's impact on education. His Smart Start initiative provides a higher quality early education, and better access to preventive health care, in nearly half the state's counties. He has pushed for higher standards for both teachers and children; indeed, the themes of his tenure have been "raising standards" and "accountability." The quality of Carolina's freshman classes is dependent upon the academic preparedness of North Carolina high school graduates. He also has led the movement to better prepare technical school graduates for the workplace through expanded high-technology programs.

Governor Hunt has, more than any other person, set the agenda for this state in its period of explosive growth and in its emergence as a coveted place to be for retirees, business people, and college students.

Notably in higher education, he has always recognized the importance of graduate education, and he has been a supporter of larger stipends and a provision for health insurance for graduate students. He has supported a distinguished professors endowment fund. He has been a determined advocate of the Global Transpark, which had its genesis in our business school.

And, of this man who puts education first, we are proud that he and all four of his children, and the farm girl he hitchhiked to Iowa for, hold degrees from this University.

Usually, we confer this medal on people known for service specifically to Carolina. Governor Hunt's service has been much broader. As part of a large, interdependent public university system, he has helped Carolina understand how much good government can do to bolster the objectives of higher education.

This is what he said on University Day in 1993: "We believe now – as the University founders did 200 years ago – that a society grows freer and stronger when opportunity is spread widely among its citizens. And we believe now – as we did 200 years ago – that a public university can do more than any other public institution to encourage opportunity, and freedom and democracy."

We are reminded that the most enduring image of Governor Hunt's unprecedented service to his state may not be the governor's portrait, but a picture of him reading to a child.