

Joel Lawrence Fleishman '55

“Superstars strive for approbation,” Henry Kissinger once said. “Heroes walk alone. Superstars crave consensus; heroes define themselves by the judgment of a future they see it as their task to bring about. Superstars seek success in a technique for eliciting support; heroes pursue success as the outgrowth of inner values.”

He could have been talking about Joel Fleishman.

Joel has spent his life bringing together people and ideas and turning collective visions into action, and he is not inclined to take the spotlight. Directly, through his academic and professional relationships with politicians and philanthropic organizations, and indirectly, through his mentoring, teaching and friendships, Joel has helped improve the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of people in the state, region and nation.

A Fayetteville native, Joel never thought seriously of going to college any place but Carolina. By the time of his graduation, he had distinguished himself in the classroom, in student politics and in the campus arts and social scene. Already noted for his boundless energy and eclectic interests, Joel went on to earn a Carolina law degree in 1959 while writing, directing and producing plays and earning a master's degree in dramatic art.

Joel worked briefly at Yale University but returned in 1961 as legal adviser to Gov. Terry Sanford '39. It was in this position that Joel's visionary strength began to achieve profound impact, including laying the foundation for the national war on poverty and other state initiatives. Joel also worked closely with student leaders at Carolina, guiding a remarkable group of future political and social leaders.

Returning to Yale in 1965 to direct its innovative summer high school, Joel began getting noticed as he led the school's Institute of Social Sciences. Sanford, newly installed as Duke University president, came calling again, this time asking Joel to come to Durham and build a world-class public policy program. Joel accepted and has spent the past 28 years leaping from one all-consuming project at Duke to the next, wading into challenges and finding solutions. A true Renaissance man, Joel has left his academic mark as a scholar, professor, administrator and trustee, while also leading philanthropic organizations, serving as a patron of the arts, maintaining a deep religious commitment, becoming a noted wine enthusiast – and holding Duke's unofficial squash title for a dozen years.

While building an impressive list of accomplishments at Duke, he has never shrunk from controversy. Joel worked to overturn North Carolina's Speaker Ban law, helped lead the fight to keep Duke from being home to the Richard Nixon library, and helped orchestrate the university's push for increased national attention.

Joel continues to serve Duke University as a part-time professor of law and public policy studies and directs the Heyman Center for Ethics, Public Policy and the Professions. Since 1993 he has been president of the Atlantic Philanthropic Service Company, a consulting company that advises confidential clients in their anonymous charitable giving.

Joel remains disarmingly personable. His social skills are renowned, as are many of his friends – from heads of entertainment companies to the president of the United States. He offers every acquaintance the same gracious regard. As he once said after giving a talk to a smaller-than-expected crowd, “If you have the right people, it doesn't matter how many of them there are.”

Like Terry Sanford before him, Joel sees nothing odd about a Carolina alumnus leading Duke to prominence. He is a long-time believer that the rivalry between Carolina and Duke has made both universities stronger, particularly on the academic side. He says he simply has played the hand the good Lord dealt him.

Wherever he has been, Joel has always had his hand in one of the most important aspects of service to his alma mater.

Gerry Hancock '65, a Raleigh attorney and former state legislator, started the Public School Forum using many of the ideas and skills he learned as a Carolina student from Joel. “It's not just what Joel has accomplished himself,” he says. “It's what he taught other people to do.”

Don Baer '76 calls it “matching people and their ambitions to the wider world. Joel has been a tremendous mentor to several generations of students at Carolina.”

Bob Spearman '65 recalls Joel's work with UNC student leaders from the perspective of the student body president: “Wherever he's been, whether it's Chapel Hill, Yale or Duke, and when he was working with Terry Sanford, he always made an enormous effort to help students.”

Finally, we don't have to look far to know where Joel's true loyalties lie. While he's spent all of those years working for Duke, he's never chosen to live anywhere but Chapel Hill.