

In Memoriam: Grey Ferris

The Winter Institute lost a great friend and advisory board member when Grey Ferris passed away in June.

### **Grey Flowers Ferris**

Grey Flowers Ferris, a farmer, former state senator and longtime advocate for public education in Mississippi, died at his home outside Vicksburg Friday, June 13, 2008, following a long illness. He was 62.

According to friends and family members, it would be impossible to understand Grey Ferris or his rise to public prominence without understanding his background, his deep roots in Mississippi culture, his devotion to family and his relationship to the family farm.

From the living room of Grey and Jann Ferris' hilltop home on the farm in southern Warren County, you can look out over rolling green hills dotted with lakes and ponds where the Ferris cattle drink and where friends, neighbors and family members have been coming to fish for generations. The surrounding woodlands provide a thriving ecosystem for deer, wild turkeys, squirrels, bobcats, foxes, an abundance of birds and other wild animals. The family home site is thickly planted with azaleas, wisteria, roses, lilies, sweet olive, camellias and irises.

This is the place where Grey Ferris, a distinguished lawyer, farmer, civic leader, legislator and dedicated backer of public education, was born on May 31, 1946. And this is the place where he chose to be laid to rest in the green and peaceful family cemetery.

This is the place where Grey Ferris and his four siblings grew up under the close and loving care of their mother, Shelby Flowers Ferris, and their father, William Reynolds Ferris. Grey Ferris always claimed that it was from his mother and father, one a master gardener, the other a master farmer, that he inherited his love of the land and his devotion to farming. His mother was quick to return the kind words, calling her son "...as dear to me as life itself. I cannot imagine this world without Grey in it. He's given his life to his family and this farm."

This is the place where Grey Ferris and his wife, Jann, an acclaimed artist and educator, raised their three children: Lylen Ferris, a naturopathic physician practicing in Portland, Ore.; Jason Ferris, a Presbyterian minister now living and working in New York City; and Jessica Shelby Ferris, a gifted young artist who passed away in 1999. In the closing weeks and days of Grey Ferris' life, his family was with him around the clock, and his wife, Jann, almost never left his

side, caring for him constantly and compressing 38 years of devotion and love into his final hours.

This is also the place that Grey Ferris often referred to as "...a kind of paradise, as close to heaven on earth as any place I can imagine."

"If it's a paradise, and I think it is," said Grey's brother Bill, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, "it's because Grey worked 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week to cultivate, protect and preserve it. He was a great steward of the land."

This is the place where Grey Ferris worked side by side with his employees to plant more than 50,000 bulbs in the last years of his life.

"When you see those flowers, all those daffodils in bloom," said Grey's sister Hester Magnuson, who lives and works in Austin, Texas, "it's impossible not to think of Grey. I think it's fair to say his spirit lives in every inch of ground on this farm. It's really a legacy to us. His gift."

"There is nothing in the world more wonderful," Grey Ferris once said, "than being able to step outside your door and find fresh flowers to cut."

At the time he said this, Grey Ferris was sitting in a wheelchair at River Region Medical Center waiting for an invasive pulmonary procedure designed to improve his labored breathing, which had been greatly impaired by his long battle with metastatic lung cancer, a battle that finally took his life but never robbed him of his spirit, never diminished his love of the land or prevented him from meeting his commitments and responsibilities.

"Grey faced his illness and death in a way that was very direct and race," said his sister Shelby Fitzpatrick, a master jeweler who lives in England, "and his willingness to confront reality and face the truth without ever losing his spirit was very moving to all of us."

"He taught us how to live by the way he died," said his sister Martha Ferris, an artist who lives and works on the family farm. "He showed us what it means to live life to the fullest and then leave it without fear. He wasn't just a good man, he was also a great one."

These sentiments were echoed by Lylen Ferris, who on her father's final birthday read from a letter she had written him: "You have been an amazing father! Your generosity knows no bounds. You have always given of yourself, but of course the greatest gift you've given me, given all of us, is the love of this farm and a love of family. I know that your love will sustain me for the rest of my life."

Former Mississippi Secretary of State and longtime family friend Dick Molpus put both the public and personal dimension of Grey Ferris' life into perspective when

he said, "Professionally, Grey Ferris was a stunningly effective, strong and noble public servant. Personally, he was a decent, kind and gentle soul. His tireless work to ensure that every child in Mississippi had the skills to succeed, regardless of their race or economic status, secures his place in our state's history. I, along with many others, will miss his friendship, and all of us who call ourselves Mississippians are greatly diminished by the passing of this good man."

Shortly before Grey Ferris died, his son Jason, speaking from the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church in Vicksburg, praised his father for his public spirit, his uncommon decency and his exceptional honesty, calling him a politician unafraid to say those three fearful words: "I don't know." After his father's death, Jason said, "My father was a born leader. He led with compassion and humility and had a gift for bringing together disparate parties to get things done. Dad always put the needs of others before his own, and he had a special sensitivity for anyone who had been denied the opportunities given to him. He was a planter statesman of the highest order and there will never be another like him."

Another close friend, Jimmy Gouras, spoke for many when he described Grey Ferris as "...the most honorable, the gentlest, the kindest person you could ever meet. Grey was the kind of man we all wanted to be when we grew up."

Grey Ferris always viewed his childhood as idyllic, and he once wrote: "Our parents instilled in all of us a deep respect for the land, an appreciation for the rich racial diversity of our region, and an abiding love of education."

Ferris attended public schools in Warren County and Vicksburg before finishing his secondary education at Brooks School in North Andover, Mass. Upon graduation from Brooks, he was awarded the Faculty Prize, which is presented to the student who contributes most to improving the welfare of the school. He was especially proud of the role he played in encouraging the recruitment and acceptance of the school's first minority student.

Ferris graduated from Tulane University and the Tulane School of Law. As an undergraduate, he served as president of the student body. It was also at Tulane that Grey Ferris met his future wife, Jann Terral, and the two of them were wed in New Orleans on June 6, 1970. Following graduation from law school, Grey Ferris returned to Vicksburg to practice with the law firm of Dent, Ward, Martin and Terry. While he thoroughly enjoyed the practice of law, he decided to return to the farm when his father's health began to fail.

Ferris considered public service a privilege and served on the boards of the Vicksburg Art Association, the Mercy Regional Medical Center, the Soil and Water Conservation Commission, the Mississippi Museum of Art, the Mississippi School Board Association and the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. He was a deacon of the First Presbyterian Church.

Ferris's greatest passion - beyond his family and farm - was a commitment to improve public education. He was elected to the first board for the Vicksburg Warren School District and worked tirelessly to consolidate the two districts into one.

According to Kermit Harness, former principal of Vicksburg High School who worked closely with Grey Ferris on the consolidation, "Grey was the anchor, he was the one who held everything together. He was always fair and kind, and he took everyone's needs into consideration."

Grey Ferris' passionate commitment to public education, along with his love of the arts, was shared by his wife, Jann, herself an accomplished artist. The two of them worked together closely year after year to develop ideas and programs designed to make the arts a vital part of the school curriculum in Mississippi. They even found time to teach courses together in art appreciation to elementary school students in Warren County.

After serving six years as chairman of the Vicksburg Warren School Board, Ferris was elected to the Mississippi State Senate and served two terms. During his second term, he was chairman of the Senate Education Committee, and he committed himself to reforming educational opportunities in rural and underfunded areas of Mississippi.

He worked closely with librarians to create the Magnolia project, which provided local libraries with an online database containing thousands of reference materials. For the first time, schools even in the most remote areas of Mississippi had access to unlimited resource materials.

Ferris was especially proud of his efforts to create and pass the Adequate Education Act. He and Sen. Hob Bryan were the lead authors of this measure, which changed the funding formula for public education and channeled additional, desperately needed state resources into the poorest, most underserved districts of Mississippi. Jere Nash, co-author of "Mississippi Politics," said of the Adequate Education Act: "No piece of legislation has helped and will continue to help Mississippi's children and students more than that bill."

As a citizen and a public servant, Grey Ferris devoted his life to strengthening Warren County, Vicksburg and Mississippi through improved education and health care. Ferris' compassion and love for his family, his friends and the land he worked were beyond measure, and he left this world a far better place than he found it.

"Grey has been my partner and my love since I was 18 years old," said his wife, Jann. "His enormous spirit lives on and will continue to guide our family in the years to come."

Grey Ferris was preceded in death by his daughter, Jessica Shelby Ferris; and his father, William Reynolds Ferris.

Survivors include his wife, Jann Terral Ferris; daughter, Lylen Terral Ferris and her husband, Michael Swierczuk, of Portland; son, Jason Reynolds Ferris and his wife, Rebecca Marshall Ferris, of New York, N.Y.; grandchildren, Nathan Shelby Swierczuk and Ruby Grace Swierczuk of Portland; his mother, Shelby Flowers Ferris; brother, William Reynolds Ferris Jr. and his wife, Marcie Cohen Ferris, of Chapel Hill, N.C.; sisters, Shelby Ferris Fitzpatrick and her husband, Peter Fitzpatrick, of Sturry, England, Hester Ferris Magnuson and her husband, James Magnuson, of Austin and Martha Ferris and her husband, Kos Kostmayer, of Vicksburg.

Memorials may be made to the Shelby Ferris Art Therapy Endowment, payable to UMMC Office of Development, 2500 N. State St., Jackson, MS 39216. Please write "In Memory of Grey Ferris" on the memo line of the check.

Contributions may also be made to the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, The University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677.