

Planes, trains, buses: All in this board member's wheelhouse

GoTriangle Board Member William A. Allen III knows firsthand what it's like to steer a city bus full of passengers safely to their destinations. As a law student at the University of North Carolina in the early 1970s, he worked as a bus operator for Chapel Hill Transit.

"It was my part-time job," Allen recalls. "I got up really early in the morning before class, and I drove buses for a few hours. Then I went to class, and I would come back and drive again. I usually ended up putting in 30 or 40 hours a week."

Attending law school and working a physically and mentally taxing job might drain the energy of many people, but Allen says he has always thrived on work, whether paid or not. His first job at age 12 was working for *The News & Observer*, he recalls.

"I would get up every morning at 4:30 and deliver the papers in my neighborhood by bike, which I had to do 364 days a year, every day except the day after Christmas," he says. "I did that for a couple of years. I had a job ever since doing something."

Born in Kinston, North Carolina, to a teacher and a lawyer, Allen graduated from NC State University with a bachelor's degree in politics while working three jobs to pay his bills. As a college student, he was interested in sustainable issues, taking the first environmental course offered and attending the first Earth Day in 1970.

Driven by a strong interest in railroads, he began work for the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad, now known as CSX, as a telegraph operator and a dispatcher trainee. Seaboard offered him entry into management training, but he declined, knowing he planned to attend law school. However, a couple of years into law school, he realized the profession was not a good fit for him.

"I didn't like it, and so I became a businessman, and I had a number of businesses that were very interesting," he says, noting that his first venture was founding his own charter flight business in Ohio.

Selling charter flights to Europe to students, faculty and staff at all of the major universities in Ohio eventually landed Allen a lucrative job managing European student flights returning to the U.S. So he sold his business and moved to Munich, Germany, to begin a two-year stint, and that's when the transit bug bit him hard.

"I really enjoyed my job and got to know a lot about commercial aviation," he recalls. "I didn't own a car the entire time I was there – I just used public transit in Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, France and other places where I was organizing flights out of. I used the trains all the time, and that sold me even more on public transit in trains. So when I got back here I was pretty much convinced that that was what we should do in this country."

When he returned from Europe in 1977, he started a business that exported live baby eels to Japan. The business flourished until China and Japan signed a trade agreement that cut demand for U.S.-sourced eels.

"My business collapsed overnight," Allen says. "I ended up on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* as a victim of that trade pact, and I decided in 1979 to go into management consulting. At the time, I thought of management consulting as a temporary job, and 35 years later I was still doing it."

Over the next three decades as a consultant, Allen found joy in process reengineering work, which he describes as aligning Fortune 500 business processes with their business strategies.

"I did it for many, many industries, everything from mining to food processing to insurance, but I was especially interested in – and lucky to be able to work in – two industries I already knew a lot about," he says. "One was commercial aviation – I did a lot of work for airlines – and then, a lot of work for the rail industry. My clients included the Burlington Northern Santa Fe, the Norfolk Southern and others, and I did a lot of work for rail shippers as well."



Flying out of his home base in Raleigh every Sunday night to travel to Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia and South America and returning every Friday night eventually took a toll on his personal life, he says. "I was married early, and I'm afraid my marriage only lasted about four or five years," he says. "My first wife got tired of me not being here all the time. We had no kids. We divorced."

About eight years later, he met Ruth Heuer, a former Peace Corps volunteer, sociologist and demographer, who like him enjoyed traveling. They married in 1995, had their first child when he was 50 years old and then adopted their second child from China. Becoming a father prompted him to quit consulting work so he would not be gone from home five days a week.

"I decided in late 2008 to take a big risk and get off the road – even though it would curtail my earning capacity – and see what it was like to be a stay-at-home dad," he says. "I wanted not to repeat what I had seen a lot of my colleagues in consulting do, which was to be an absent father and to be, if not estranged, at least kind of a stranger to their children."

Being at home, he says, he reconnected with his community and soon began volunteer work that eventually led to elected office. He worked for former President Obama's election campaign and then began co-chairing the Passenger Rail Task Force for the Raleigh City Council, advising on major rail issues. He was involved in recommending the location of Raleigh Union Station and the optimal route for Southeast High Speed Rail to enter Raleigh from the north.

"I got involved in my neighborhood because I just couldn't stay not busy; I like to work," he says. "I organized my neighborhood into a neighborhood association and that led to me attending the Hillsborough Citizen Advisory Council meetings, and then pretty soon I was elected vice-chair and then chair for eight years."

In 2011 and 2013, he was elected to chair the Raleigh Citizens Advisory Council, and as the Raleigh City Council appointed him to more and more committees, he got even more involved in local communities. Eight years ago, when he saw the GoTriangle board had an opening for a City of Raleigh representative, he asked then-Mayor Nancy McFarland to appoint him.

"I thought it would be the perfect fit, and it has because of my life-long commitment to public transit," he says, noting that he is not anti-automobile. "I believe people should have choices. I like to drive, frankly. But I think that people ought to have choices about what they do. And we have to start providing choices to get away from our utter dependency upon the private automobile."

As a board member, he says his strength is his expertise in rail, and he is excited about integrating all modes of transit into a regional network with commuter rail as its spine.

While he is enthusiastic about the arrival of commuter rail and a connected transit network, he says obstacles in its path remain to be overcome.

"We talk a lot about regional transit, but we need to actually be regional," he says. "We need to think region. We have to act regional, not just talk about it. We need to be fully committed to it, and that means that all three counties and the larger area, too."



On a personal note, he says as a board member and former essential worker, our operators and mechanics are always on his mind and he appreciates the work they do. He wants them to know that he values their opinions and is open to answering any questions they may have about the board's goals.

"The drivers, the mechanics, they make up the majority of our workforce, and frankly I want them to be happy," he says.

Pictured: Allen and Heuer have two children, Will and Clara.