

## Board member relishes his full plate: dad, lawyer and community volunteer

A father of seven, full-time lawyer and GoTriangle Board of Trustees member, Michael S. Fox exudes calm as he multi-tasks through his responsibilities and the many community efforts he has helped shape through his volunteer work.

His secret?

“Well, I don’t need a lot of sleep, which is good,” he says with a laugh. “I can get by on five or six hours of sleep most nights, and so I’ve got a lot of daylight to do things in.”



At the start of a recent interview, Fox excused himself to help his 16-year-old twins – who called for his advice on an urgent matter – and resumed the conversation 10 minutes later without missing a beat. Parenting, he says, has informed all aspects of his life, giving him perspective into other viewpoints and an ability to roll with the punches. His children – three from his first marriage and four from his second marriage to wife, Angela – keep the couple busy and entertained.

“Having seven kids will cause you to be calm,” he says. “Because if you get excited about everything, you’ll stress yourself to death. There is so much now in my life that happens that I say, ‘Well, that was unfortunate. How do we fix that and move on?’ Having seven kids has certainly given me a lot of patience and a tremendous amount of understanding.”

Born in Fort Benning, Georgia, Fox grew up in Boone, North Carolina, and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in history and political science from Appalachian State University before earning a J.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While in high school, he worked at a gas station in Boone and while an undergraduate, as an ASU Bookstore janitor, maintenance and sales employee.

When he was a child, watching his mother head to work for an attorney gave him a desire to study law, but his first job as an attorney – at Fisher and Phillips in Atlanta – was not the legal practice he had in mind. As a recent graduate, he was not offered a chance to argue cases in court, so after two years, he joined the district attorney’s office in Atlanta and happily went to court every day.

“I loved that, and I worked mostly with domestic violence cases,” he says. “We had a pilot program where we would work to make sure that those got prosecuted.”

After his first wife got a job in Raleigh, he found work as a special prosecutor in the North Carolina Department of Justice. He worked in a group that prosecuted cases in which local district attorneys had a conflict of interest or where there might be a perception of bias.

“We actually ended up prosecuting law enforcement officers, relatives of district attorneys and judges and murder cases where the person who committed the murder was a police informant,” he says. “The group I worked with did everything from drunk driving cases to murder cases.” When the opportunity arose to work in Greensboro for Cone Mills, the world’s largest manufacturer of denim, he took it, overseeing the company’s litigation, lobbying and governmental relations during a critical time for the textile industry.

“That was when they were negotiating NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], and a lot of the international trade bills,” he recalls. “And we were, of course, lobbying to keep jobs in America, so I did a lot of work in Washington D.C. and Raleigh then.”

He stayed at Cone Mills six years before going into private practice in 2001 for Greensboro-based Tuggle Duggins law firm, where he has spent the past two decades as a litigation and land-use attorney.

### **His volunteer work**

While working as a lawyer, Fox also volunteered to serve on state and local boards and those of charitable organizations, racking up nearly three decades of service. “If you are blessed to be able to be in a position to contribute, it’s an obligation and a duty that you owe to give back to your community,” he says.

From his board memberships on the City of Greensboro’s Planning Board and the United Way to the USS North Carolina Battleship Commission and North Carolina Board of Transportation, Fox has helped shape a variety of projects across the state. As board chair at the Greensboro-based One Step Further, he helped guide the nonprofit’s efforts to provide work programs as alternatives to incarceration.

“Jail is not the right answer for everyone who commits a crime,” he says.

As board chair of the USS North Carolina Battleship Commission – which oversees North Carolina’s floating memorial to its World War II soldiers – he helped find a creative solution for repairing the aging battleship in Wilmington, North Carolina. Rather than risk towing the battleship – which had not undergone structural repair since 1946 – to Virginia or South Carolina for repairs, he helped lead the decision to build a dry dock in place.

The plan – successfully executed only once before in the U.S., he says – involved building a cofferdam to drain the water around the ship to facilitate repairs to its hull.

“As it turned out, that decision really opened up another tremendous opportunity to do environmental education where the battleship sits in a place called Eagle Island, which is mostly marsh and wetlands, and there’s a lot of wildlife in there including a couple of famous alligators that always swim around the ship,” he says.

By keeping the ship in place and building public walkways on top of the cofferdam and in the marsh, Fox says the memorial continued to generate its self-sustaining revenue and even drew return visitors to see something new.

“People for the first time could literally walk about the ship and look at it from all sides,” he says, noting that the repair of the ship was itself of interest to visitors. “So it really took a very practical solution of fixing the ship and turned it into something that’s a permanent educational tool. That was something that I was pleased to be a part of.”

### **Chair of the NCBOT**



As current chair of the North Carolina Board of Transportation, where he is serving his second term, he worked with Gov. Roy Cooper and the General Assembly to bring about a law, passed in July 2020, to give the board financial responsibility over its own budget and spend plan.

“The board had always had oversight over setting the transportation policy for the state and the department and also approving the projects that were to be built, he says. “But the board previously had never had financial responsibility over its Spend [financial] Plan, approving it and making changes as circumstances changed,” he says.

The board needed the ability to adapt its plan itself as revenue rose or dropped as it did when, during three months of the pandemic, people drove cars less and revenue dropped almost \$350 million.



Because NCDOT’s revenue comes from a combination of federal and state motor fuel taxes and fees and some grants, the process of funding is complicated. So in addition to introducing internal oversight over the budget, Fox says he and the board had to educate themselves on the financial

process quickly.

“The department is in really good financial shape right now, and our Board of Transportation really worked hard to be a part of that oversight,” he says. “And not only have we solved our immediate financial issues that we had, but I think, as importantly, we have set right foundation and processes that come after us,” he says.

As he sits on the GoTriangle board, he says, he’s happy to be working at building a better future in the state he loves.

“I just consider myself very fortunate to live in North Carolina and to be in a position where I can work with people who are making it a great place to live and work,” he says. “Having a superb and efficient regional transit service is an important part of the growth we have seen in the last 10 years, and it’s something that our citizens rely on and that we need in order to get new employers to come here. I’m really proud to be a part of that.”

In his NCDOT role as board member, Fox tours new construction of the last section of the Greensboro Urban loop with Division Engineer Wright Archer on the right, District Engineer Jason Julian on the left.

Michael Fox and his wife, Angela, enjoy a family moment with their children.