



Commissioner Greene first came to North Carolina in 1987 as a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where she met and married Paul Jones. They have a son, Tucker Jones. They are all pictured this February at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., celebrating Tucker's birthday.

Lawyer, scholar, public servant: Newest board member puts her all into service

Growing up in Gilmer, Texas, Sally Greene, gained her love for public service watching her parents, whose work was stitched into the fabric of their small town. As they ran their hometown newspaper, they were both reporting on and concerned about the well-being of their fellow residents.

“The culture that I grew up in was one in which community service was part of life. It was what you did,” says Greene, an Orange County commissioner and GoTriangle’s newest board member. “As I think of it decades later, it was a kind of ideal experience.”

The third generation in her family to run their family-founded newspaper, Greene’s mother was in touch with the heartbeat of the community, attending events in support of community causes and often championing them, Greene recalls.

“You’re working on behalf of your community when you’re at a small-town newspaper,” Greene says, “You want everybody to succeed, so you’re working all together.”

As a county commissioner and board member, Greene continues to carry on that tradition of caring for others through community service. She says it is the underlying value that connects her life’s work, although her career path has not followed a straight line as she moved from Texas to Washington, D.C., to Chapel Hill.

A lawyer – she put herself through George Washington University law school while holding a full-time job – and independent literary scholar, Greene’s varied background informs her public work. She holds a doctorate in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has worked as both a corporate lawyer and an adjunct professor of English and law. She has published academic articles, and her dogged, investigative research resulted in a North Carolina historical marker to be installed this year in Edenton. The marker brings to light a historic injustice. It will be erected at the site of the incident at issue in *State v. Mann*, a North Carolina Supreme Court opinion that upheld the “absolute” disciplinary power of enslavers.

“If you look at my resume, it’s kind of all over the place,” she says. “As often happens with two-career couples—especially so, even today, for women—what once looked like a straightforward career path met certain obstacles. But being thrown off track turned out to be liberating, as my own core values emerged to inform the choices I made as to how and where to invest my time.”

Greene started her career in public service in 2003 when a vacancy arose in the Chapel Hill Town Council, and she served there through 2017 before being elected to the Orange County Board of Commissioners in 2018. In the early 2000s, she helped found the Orange County Partnership to end homelessness, a collaborative effort funded by Orange County and the three towns within the county.

“I’m proud of that because it was the right move at the right time,” she says. “Twenty years later, it is doing very important work in the county. The partnership structure has been very successful. I’m not saying that we’ve solved homelessness – we’re far from that – but we have a strong structure in place to address it.”

As a public servant, Greene also worked to address the opioid crisis, social justice, environmental racism and climate change, among other issues, and successfully ran on a platform of equity for her re-election as county commissioner in 2022. She was one of five North Carolina commissioners awarded the 2021 Outstanding Commission Work for their work in disbursing federal opioid settlement funds. The committee of 15 members, including five county attorneys and five county managers, was tasked with proposing and negotiating with the Attorney General’s Office on the formula for distribution of the settlement funds.

“What we achieved was that 85 percent of that money – based on formulas that have to do with not just population but how seriously any county has been impacted by opioid deaths and human injuries – will go directly to counties,” she says.

Greene also advocated for a new county-supported resource, the nonprofit Reentry House Plus, which now provides housing and support to individuals transitioning from prison.

“Criminal justice reform is another strong interest of mine, and that goes back to my experience working with homelessness,” she says. “My early work in homelessness taught me about the relationship between homelessness and substance use disorders and mental health issues and the criminal justice system.”

Greene also successfully advocated to allocate a quarter-cent existing tax revenue to be available for small grants to schools and nonprofits specifically for climate mitigation projects. As a county commissioner, she recently chaired the Policy Steering Committee involved in updating the Orange County Transit Plan, which the Board of Commissioners approved in November. She says that equity leads the values guiding the plan update, and she is committed to providing transit in areas of Orange County that were historically underserved, even when they don’t have the ridership numbers that one would assume are necessary to justify a bus line.

“We know that there are neighborhoods and pockets of Chapel Hill and Orange County that have been disinvested in for generations, and we want to do our best to make transit possible in those areas,” she says.

She is also proud of the work the committee did to update the Orange County plan because it recognizes the connection between transit and housing. She sees coordinated planning of land-use and transit as a way to encourage people to get out of their cars and move the region toward climate sustainability and resilience.

“So to me, everything’s related,” she says. “We’re now coming to understand – and it’s about time – that it’s one thing to be able to afford a house, but if it is far away from a bus line or jobs or grocery stores, then, even if it may look affordable, it’s really not. So land-use planning needs to go hand in hand with transit planning. And this is something we were able to emphasize in the updated plan.”

While the updated plan outlines priorities for existing funding, it also includes a future vision that recognizes the need for regional connections, which she champions. And she says she is delighted to be on the GoTriangle board because she can already see there is a lot of interest and thought being put in regional planning to best serve business and residents of the region.