



A first-generation college graduate, this GoTriangle board member works to uplift others

The first in her family to go to college, Wake County Commissioner Susan Evans, who was appointed as Wake's representative to GoTriangle's Board of Trustees in December, has never forgotten her roots. Much of her work is designed to pave the way for those with few financial resources by providing a level playing field.

"I came out of a simple background," Evans says. "I had a great, great childhood, but being the first to go to college and having a great experience with how education opened doors

for me, I feel very strongly about every person being able to have those opportunities."

Born in Alamance County, Evans attended public schools, where she says she witnessed desegregation, an experience that shaped her outlook to understand viewpoints other than those she had grown up with. In a town where most people worked in textiles and farming, her parents were the first in their family to be office workers. Coming from an average middle-class family, they were able to afford to send her to study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1975 because it was affordable then, she says.

"Due to the investments the state had made in our university system, it was quite inexpensive, or otherwise, my family would not have been able to send me," she says. "So, I was able to have that opportunity, and I've never taken that for granted. ... Being at UNC, I was exposed to lots of great things - lots of diversity in the population, lots of diversity in thought - and it really opened up the world to me in a way that small-town North Carolina would not have."

After graduating from UNC with a bachelor's degree in accounting, Evans moved to Raleigh for her first professional job. She spent a few years in public accounting and auditing and most of her career in financial business management for various companies. After getting married and having children who attended public school, she began volunteering in the schools, where she became aware of the struggles of children who were from lower-income families. Wanting to help them, she became active in the PTA and began speaking up at Wake County school board meetings when she felt their interests, or those of the school district, were not being served. This passion led her to run for a seat on the school board, where she was elected to serve in 2011, and ultimately, led her to sit on the Wake County Board of Commissioners. She has served as a Wake County commissioner since she was elected in 2018, when a hard realization motivated her to run.

"I enjoyed the work on the school board, but one of the frustrating parts in North Carolina is that school boards have no control over any of their finances," Evans says. "They get most of it from the state, and they just have to hope that the legislature will invest the way they need to, which really, in my opinion, hasn't been happening much in recent years. And then, they have to turn to the county to ask for supplemental funding to fill in the gaps where the state really leaves some holes. So, that is what really led me to run for county commissioner."

Evans is proud of the strong collaborative partnership the county staff and Board of Commissioners now have with the school system and school board that has led to greater understanding of the school system's finances and more fruitful budget negotiations. Other educational achievements during her time on the board include the expansion of Smart Start and the debut of the Three-School Program – both of which prepare preschoolers – and Wake Tech's WakeWorks Apprenticeship program, which provides training in trades experiencing worker shortages.

“We need a lot of people going into certain industries, and we have a lot of folks that need to upskill themselves who can't afford to quit work to go back to school,” she says of the apprenticeship program. “So, we developed this program with Wake Tech, and we now have 100 employers participating, where they will pay these students during their apprenticeship to come and work with them when they're learning.”

Even before she became a commissioner, Evans says she helped promote the passage of the Wake Transit Plan, which provides funding for transit. She has been sitting on the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization board reporting to Wake County commissioners for years so is well versed in the issues and challenges of building a connected transit network in the Triangle, she says. And she is eager to improve and expand all transportation options, from roadways and bike paths to bus transit – including bus rapid transit – and regional rail.

“Running a regional rail from the east part of Wake County to the west part of Durham has been part of the Wake Transit Plan vision from the beginning, and so, I'm really interested in seeing how we can accomplish that,” she says. “And that's one of GoTriangle's primary priorities as well. We have some challenges with funding. But I think, so long as people are dedicated to trying to figure out what long game can get us there, we will get there.

With her background in financial management and housing – she spent 16 years in the local home-building industry working with builders – she says she hopes to help find good solutions for transit, which in turn can be a boon to other areas.

She sees the potential of transit to help alleviate the shortage of affordable housing in the Triangle, where the population is rapidly growing and home prices are escalating. Creating more housing, rethinking planning and zoning regulations and building transit and transit-oriented development are all important to alleviate the shortfall, she says.

“We want to make the right choices for housing in the areas where we think we will have the most transit opportunities, and transit and housing definitely go hand in hand,” she says.

With both education and housing initiatives, Wake County commissioners have been very creative in recent years with allocating more money to new “cradle to career” initiatives to help people with low wealth.

“Our board is very focused on the fact that, even though Wake County is a fairly prosperous region, that prosperity is not shared equitably across all of our residents. So, we're working in all kinds of ways,” she says. “But a lot of things we are putting into motion are trying to address improving upward mobility in our region.”

Wake Commissioner Susan Evans (pictured) and her husband live in Cary and have two daughters who live and work in Wake County and a 2-year-old grandson. Her daughters attended Wake County schools and North Carolina's state university system.