

## Desire to help community leads GoTriangle board treasurer from homemaker, business owner and chef to mayor

Growing up in rural Randolph County, North Carolina, Vivian Jones never imagined leading a burgeoning town into a new century, but the example her parents always set about the importance of public service ultimately led her to become Wake Forest's first female—and longest serving—mayor.

"I've been involved in the community because that's the way I grew up," she says. "Back in those days, the church was a big part of the community, so [my parents] were a big part of the church. My father was in the Lions Club, on the local school board, and he helped start the volunteer fire department. That was what you did – you helped your community in any way that you could. So I grew up doing that, and I've done that everywhere I've lived."

Her aspirations were to become a wife and mother, and after attending secretarial school and working as a secretary, she got married, became a stay-at-home mother of two and moved with her family around the U.S.

In 1981, they landed in Wake Forest, and Jones worked first as a secretary, then merchandising manager for Variety Wholesalers. After 25 years, her marriage ended in divorce, and she found herself an empty nester, so she opened Jovi's Kitchen with her sister, Jonnie, in downtown Wake Forest. While her sister helped customers in the front, Jones was the chief cook in the back. The memory of that restaurant, now closed, still makes her smile as she talks about the "good ol' country cooking" she served customers for lunch and dinner: chicken pie, meatloaf, shrimp and crab dishes.

"We were known for our crab cakes and our crab soup," she says, adding that although the restaurant wasn't fancy, it was very nice with table cloths and napkins. "Our restaurant was successful in that we paid our bills, and we hired a few people and gave them jobs. They loved my cooking; people loved our food. They still talk about it. It was important to me and to my sister for us to do whatever we could to help our community.

The sisters shut the restaurant after about six years but continued to cater for another two before closing the business when Jones was elected to serve on the Wake Forest town board in 1999. She says she ended up running quite unexpectedly after speaking up at a town meeting when the audience was voicing displeasure with how the council was handling some issues.

"I went to the public hearing, and I spoke, and I said, 'If you don't like who is elected, then you get behind somebody and you get them elected – that's how you make changes to your town board,'" she recalls. "So after that, I had somebody come up to me and say, 'We want you to run.' And so I ended up running for the town board, and I was elected, and in 2001, I ran for mayor."

Now in her fifth term as mayor, Jones is proud of several achievements, starting with helping to bring public transportation to Wake Forest. She says when she first was elected, senior citizens told her that they needed public transit. Then, after the Winn-Dixie supermarket moved out of a lower income neighborhood, she noticed its residents without cars had no way to get groceries without calling a cab.

"So as the mayor, I went to every meeting where they said they were going to talk about transportation," she recalls, laughing. "And I got to know the people at GoTriangle and at the CAT [Capital Area Transit] system in Raleigh. Wakefield is right beside us in Wake Forest, and I kept telling them, 'You need a bus in Wakefield, too, and it could come over into Wake Forest and we could work together.'"



She believes her advocacy encouraged GoTriangle to begin serving Wake Forest with the Wake Forest Express route, which began running in 2008. Shortly thereafter, GoRaleigh approached her about starting its local route to run through Wake Forest and Wakefield, she says, adding that both bus routes have improved residents' lives.

"After we had the bus, the next election, I was campaigning, and I was walking down the street in the lower income area of Wake Forest, and there was a guy across the street from me, and he said, 'Aren't you Mayor Jones?' And I said, 'Yes.' And he came running across the street, and he said, 'I want to shake your hand, and I want to thank you for getting the bus because I have the best job I've had in a long time because I can get to it!'"

These moments of hearing how she helped people inspire her. "I love being the mayor," she says. "I love helping my community and encouraging my community. I love working with the kids.

Each school year, Jones attends a Wake Forest High School civics class to help shed light on how government functions and how residents can participate. A few years ago, she was thrilled to help bring about a change that some high school students wanted — allowing for a left turn out of the school's parking lot — after they petitioned for it. The "no left turn rule" was created after nearby residents complained that students created too much traffic their neighborhood. Jones sent a town transportation engineer to survey the area, speak with school leadership and return with his recommendation to her, which she then approved. The left turn was reinstated.

"I like to tell [students] that story to tell them, you know, you can do something," she says. "You don't have to wait to be an adult. You make a presentation. You figure it out. You come and tell us what you think we should do, and you can make a difference."

Jones has made her mark on Wake Forest in revitalizing the downtown and in establishing the Renaissance Centre arts venue in a vacant drug store. She suggested the town buy the property and renovate it, which happened with the help of a Wake County grant, and the center soon became popular.

"We've been able to bring plays and concerts and all kinds of art programming," she says. "We've worked with [Raleigh] Little Theatre to teach theater classes to kids, so we've been able to do a lot of things there in the arts that have meant a lot to our community."

She also is proud of helping start the Wireless Research Center of North Carolina by offering a \$300,000 town grant to Gerard "Gerry" Hayes, a young man who approached her for funding to start a testing facility for wireless technology. After the town provided the loan, Hayes obtained a large grant from the Golden Leaf Foundation, and the facility was born. The center is now both a testing and research facility for wireless technology with international clients and has become a start-up incubator for Triangle companies.

"Gerry started the Wireless Research Center of North Carolina, and we have one of the top wireless testing facilities in the United States, right here in Wake Forest," Jones says. "He is working with people all over the world, bringing them here, and he has been very innovative in helping people start new jobs. He has helped start about 80 companies in the Triangle area, 20 of those in Wake Forest."

First appointed to the GoTriangle board in 2013 and then treasurer in 2019, Jones says she counts on GoTriangle staff to keep her informed just as she counts on her town staff to do the same.

When it comes to transportation, Jones believes the Triangle needs to push ahead with improvements and says newcomers who have grown up with transit could be key in helping us shake old habits and move in the right direction. The biggest obstacles facing transit today are a lack of knowledge about it and an unwillingness to fund it, she says.

"We haven't had transit that much in North Carolina so people have been so used to driving their car," she says. "I think that all the people moving in here have helped to say, 'Hey, I've always had transit,' so that is helping us. ... And there are so many people who would be better off if they had an opportunity to get a better job, to get to a different place."