

Joel Edward Anderson Jr.

As chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Joel Anderson is growing a campus with outstanding faculty. He does it with a home-grown intellect.

BY KIMBERLY DISHONGH
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Joel Anderson and three friends left around 10 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 30, 1962, for an impromptu trip to the University of Mississippi. They drove all night and arrived in Oxford, amidst rioting, just before dawn on the day James Meredith was to be admitted as the university's first black student.

"I think part of it was the desire to be at a place where history was happening and by that time in my life I had certainly come to the point of being very supportive of the civil-rights movement," says Anderson, now chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Anderson and his friends were swept up in a raid at dawn in Oxford, interrogated by FBI agents and put on a military bus until after dark. Then federal marshals decided they were harmless bystanders, unchained them from the other prisoners and set them free.

"I wouldn't say it was a really frightening day but it was certainly scary in the sense that we had no idea what was going to be coming next," Anderson says, describing U.S. marshals standing around holding their guns and breathing through gas masks because the air was still saturated with tear gas sprayed the day before.

He grew up in the small northeast Arkansas town of Swifton, and his family espoused the prevalent Southern white opinion that segregation was "a proper arrangement." His teachers at Harding College (now Harding University) in Searcy, which was segregated until his senior year in 1963, saw things a little differently.

"There were faculty members there who despite the official policy in favor of segregation held the view that the school ought to be integrated and that it was simply wrong for Christians to embrace such a practice," says Anderson. "That was very eye-opening to me. Over time, with a lot of conversations, as well as a lot of reading, I also came to the conclusion that the kind of discrimination that I had seen everywhere toward blacks was simply wrong, that it was sinful."

In his inaugural address as UALR chancellor in September 2003, Joel Anderson announced plans for UALR's Institute of Government to poll Pulaski County residents annually on racial attitudes as a tool to evaluate perceptions that can be the root of conflicts.

"In my judgment, race remains the No. 1 issue in the state," he says. "Where all of this is hopefully leading is to a reframing of a community agenda that deals with race. And I say a reframing, because the agenda on race is stale. The language is the same, the issues are the same, and as a result when somebody blows the trumpet, nobody shows up for the battle. But the problems are still real and deep, and they need to be attacked."

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/BENJAMIN KRAIN

'UALR has made great progress in recent decades, but it is still a young university, and we need to speed its development.'

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Anderson

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In order to get there we need to reframe an agenda that then catches people's attention and motivates them to go to work on it."

In a March 2004 speech Anderson gave at the release of the first survey's results, he said UALR's role is to help in solving community problems.

"To achieve a solution, there has to be a broad-based community-wide commitment and effort," he said. "The university cannot provide that effort by itself. But the university is in a position to encourage it, to facilitate it, and to provide good information that good people of good will must have as they endeavor to work through a difficult issue."

The survey has explored religion, local government, community involvement, education, and most recently, health care. It is but one way Anderson champions UALR in partnerships with the community.

UALR received a community-development innovation award from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis' Little Rock branch for the partnership aspects of its University District initiative, winning praise for "spearheading a comprehensive community-development plan as a model for replication across the state."

The University District unites neighborhood associations, businesses, banks and churches to develop and revitalize the area around the UALR campus.

A MAJOR PURCHASE

"In some ways you can see the acquiring of the [University Plaza] Shopping Center as a part of the long-term revitalization efforts because between 1960 and 2000, a 40-year-period, the U.S. Census records show that in a 20-block radius of this campus there was a loss of 29 percent of the population," Anderson says. "So that's a sign of social distress — that we need to do something. Partnership is a big word here on campus and that's a big example of it."

The purchase of the shopping center — 22 acres of land and about 245,000 square feet of enclosed building space — in 2004 is still a topic of small talk for people who see Anderson around town.

"For some reason that really captured people's interest," says Anderson. "I don't really have an explanation for why that is, but maybe I would speculate that people maybe intuitively recognize it as a kind of strategic move on the part of the campus. ... And one of these days it will be an impressive front door to the campus. It really sort of completes the campus down to Asher Avenue, and it really gives us a highly visible place."

UALR looks much different today than it did when Anderson arrived on campus in 1971 as an assistant professor of political science from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

"I've just gotten to grow up with the place in many ways," he says. "When we left Arkansas, we were realistic in knowing that when I finished my doctorate that I would go wherever the jobs were and actually were not optimistic that I would come back to Arkansas. I'm sure it was an attractive thought, but it was not an expectation that we had."

Anderson had met his wife, Ann Gaskin, while they were undergraduates at Harding riding with a group of mutual friends from Searcy to a football game at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville.

They married in 1964, soon after he received a bachelor's degree in political science. They spent the first year and a half of their marriage in Washington, while Anderson worked on his master's degree in international relations at American University.

"I served as a tour guide for every member of the family, and some that I'm really not sure were blood kin but claimed to be," Anderson says. "Everyone took advantage of our presence in Washington to come visit, and we were glad to see them, at least in most instances. We had a one-bedroom apartment and in most instances they were staying with us, so it was close



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SELF PORTRAIT

Joel Anderson

- **DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH** Jan. 20, 1942, Newport.
- **I WANT PEOPLE TO THINK OF ME AS** Considerate and interested in them.
- **IN HIGH SCHOOL, I WAS** Active in school activities, 4-H and church.
- **A BOOK I RECENTLY READ AND LIKED IS** *Cotton Fields*, by Enid Haney Barber. It's by a woman who grew up in and around Swifton.
- **TO MY FANTASY DINNER PARTY, I WOULD INVITE** George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.
- **MY KIDS WOULD SAY I'M** A big coffee drinker.
- **MY FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH IS** Probably the breakfast table on Saturday mornings because I can spend as much time as I want to drinking coffee and reading the newspaper.
- **IF I HAD TO CHOOSE ANOTHER PROFESSION, I WOULD BE** A businessman.
- **ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP** Optimistic.

fellowship."

Anderson's father, Joel E. Anderson, ran for sheriff in Jackson County and lost by fewer than 100 votes. His interest in government and politics kindled the same in Anderson.

"I'm sure that growing up I wondered if a political career might be in my future, but I never really seriously started down that road," he says, while conceding that the chancellor of a public university exists in a political arena.

There is a bust of the young Abraham Lincoln in the corner of his office, a gift from Michael Warrick, a member of UALR's art faculty, who discovered the chancellor's fondness for the president.

"Ever since I was a kid I have been a Lincoln fan," says Anderson. "The man could put words together like no other president. He was a common man and at the same time exceptionally great."

NONPARTISAN PERSPECTIVE

The collection of elephants displayed in his office, built around one given to him by former Chancellor G. Robert Ross when he was dean of the graduate school, holds no political party significance for him.

"I am one or the other, and you might be surprised at my answer, but since I became dean, a central administrator, I've tried — and I think people should — to be scrupulously nonpartisan," say Anderson, "because when the Legislature goes into session, and there's a governor in

the need for more graduate programs and professional schools and so on.

"I read that and I said to Ann, 'If we ever went back to Arkansas I think that's the place I would like to go.' A year or so later when the time came for me to hit the job market, when I was finishing up, the university here had really started to grow rapidly and new positions were being added to departments all over the campus, including political science. So I applied for an opening in political science and got it."

Anderson had taught political science at Harding in 1966-1967, between getting his master's degree and working on his doctorate. Before that, he had accumulated some teaching experience as a student in high school. When a teacher was sick, the superintendent often asked Anderson to substitute-teach, usually in an elementary through junior high class, but occasionally in a high school class packed with his peers.

"I found it challenging to teach my classmates," he says. "If the English teacher was gone, and I was in charge of class that day, sometimes that was a little bit challenging. The other grades were fine. I never had any trouble with those. My classmates weren't all that respectful, but I escaped without injury."

Jim Harvey, the retired chief executive officer of Central Arkansas Water, grew up in Swifton, a couple of grades ahead of Anderson.

"Joel was always very studious," says Harvey. "He has always been extremely responsible."

MERGER OF WATER SYSTEMS

Anderson was chairman of the committee that looked into issues leading to the merger of the Little Rock and North Little Rock water systems in 2001.

"That was a much-needed thing, but it would have been so easy to not have taken that responsibility, to not have taken the risk that he did of upset-

ting people," says Harvey, who worked for Little Rock Municipal Waterworks. "It was just sort of one of those things that you would not have expected the university to have done because of the political fallout."

Harvey says Anderson handled it all with grace: "He was very open-minded. He listened and he talked to several people on both sides."

Harvey attends Pleasant Valley Church of Christ with Anderson and also sees him at Rotary Club meetings.

Anderson will serve as president of the Rotary Club of Little Rock, the sixth-largest in the world, for 2008-2009. He began speaking to Rotary clubs while still in high school, often about 4-H. He was state president and a national achievement winner as a teenager, and as a result got to make trips to Chicago and Washington.

"Those were just terrific experiences for someone who had grown up on a farm and had never been to a city bigger than Memphis," says Anderson. "I thought Washington, D.C., was spectacular."

Anderson's father was a farmer who later went to work for Blue Cross Blue Shield, although the family — including Anderson's mom, Norris, and his two older sisters — still lived on the farm.

"We rented it, so I worked on the farm the whole time I was growing up," he says. "I picked cotton every fall from probably age 6 to 17. It was not bad. I had a lot of good times picking cotton. I got to keep what I earned. We made \$3 for 100 pounds."

His children grew up in Little Rock, enjoying childhoods very different from his rural one.

"I'm sorry that more young people don't have that kind of experience," he says. "But let me hasten to say that I love living in

Little Rock. It's a great place to live and it was a great place to raise three sons."

Lincoln Anderson, the oldest, is a businessman in Little Rock; Dr. Deverick Anderson lives in North Carolina; the youngest, Mitchell Anderson, is a missionary in the Czech Republic.

Anderson's home is near Coleman Creek, which runs through the UALR campus and was long See **UALR**, Page 9D