

## **Dr. Jerry Lynn Beasley**

Jerry Beasley was born July 18, 1944, in New Braunfels, Texas. His parents were Harold and Margaurite Beasley. He had one brother, Philip. As a child, he grew up in Hinton, West Virginia. At age 12, his family moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In Florida, he excelled as a student and graduated with honors from Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale.

“I lived in Hinton until I was 12, before my family moved to Florida. On Sunday afternoons, we would go out for drives, and Athens was one of the places we visited. We’d come on campus, and I was struck by the beauty of it, including the sloping yard across from this building (Marsh Hall, the college’s administration building),” Beasley recalled. Another feature also attracted the Summers County native to the Athens campus. “We didn’t have public swimming pools in Summers County then, so that was another attraction for me,” he said. In addition, Beasley said, many of his teachers in elementary school were Concord graduates, which was another tie to the school.

He attended Harvard College and graduated cum laude in 1966 with his A.B. in American History, from Harvard Graduate School of Education with his Ed.M. in 1969, and from Stanford University with his Ph.D. in 1980 focusing his doctoral research on innovations in state government. Beasley continued his education as a National Institute for Mental Health Fellow in organizational studies. He then served as vice president for planning and development at West Virginia Wesleyan, a four-year liberal arts institution in Buckhannon, 1982—1985.

On July 1, 1985, he replaced the retiring Dr. Meredith Freeman and became Concord’s 17th president. “I was thrilled to get the opportunity to serve at a college that served the people and region I care so much about. That’s rare in higher education — to be put in such a role, since it’s somewhat like the military, in that when you get an assignment, you go to it and do the best you can, even if it wasn’t what you really wanted. I wanted to come here,” he said. Beasley said when he returned to Concord, he wanted to disprove novelist Tom Wolfe’s “You Can’t Go Home Again.”

During the summer of 1972, Beasley was employed at Concord as a special assistant to the president. “I worked on efforts to improve student enrollment, (which I resumed non-stop) when I became president here,” he said. Beasley said that he continued to maintain close ties with Concord over the years, including keeping in touch with old friends from Hinton who graduated from there. While

working on and obtaining his doctorate from Stanford University, Beasley was hired by Waynesburg College in Pennsylvania as vice president for planning and development 1974—1982. He returned to West Virginia and worked for the newly organized West Virginia Board of Regents as an assistant to the Chancellor. “I went around to all the colleges and developed relationships,” Beasley said, thinking back on his first encounters with then-Concord President Dr. Joseph F. Marsh Jr., and Concord Director of Student Services, Kevin O’Sullivan and his wife, Anne.

He later went on to serve as the President of Concord College/University from 1985-2008. He currently resides in Athens, West Virginia where he serves a member of the Hinton Area Foundation, Concord University Foundation, and Concord United Methodist Church.

Beasley began his career at Concord somewhat unconventionally by forgoing the traditional inauguration and devoting the funds and efforts normally expended on such ceremonies to the support of student scholarships. “I cannot justify the expenditure of thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours in inaugural preparations the needs for financial assistance to students and funds for faculty development are paramount,” he said in an announcement in 1986. “Over the years, I have come to accept some of my wisdom as an educator, because I realized that I had to make changes in what I grew to love about Concord for it to grow toward the goals I wanted for it. Education is about changes in people’s lives and places. In many ways, I had idealized the place I had visited so often as a youngster, which is not always healthy. You must be an optimist and hope that you are changing things for the better,” he said. Following up on that statement, he invited the community to join in efforts to improve educational opportunities in southern West Virginia. Such efforts have resulted in numerous donors both locally and outside the state’s borders to create various scholarships, which have not only covered academic disciplines, but, in many cases, involved community service as well.

Beasley married Jean Dressler, a Hinton native, a graduate of Marshall University and West Virginia University School of Law. She passed in 2012. They had three daughters: Heather, who completed her Doctorate at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Mich. She is now working on a project with the University of Michigan to improve math instruction; Leah, living outside of Detroit, Mich., earned her Doctorate and is the founder of Beasley College Consulting that works with students worldwide to navigate the college admissions process; and Sarah, a

graduate student at Boston College in Boston, Mass. (now Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Concord University).

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The following are excerpts from an article that Dr. Beasley authored in the Hinton News on May 24, 2023.

### **Connections Between Concord University and Summers County**

The late Brooks Hays, a former congressman who held an honorary degree from Concord, once told of two constituents who visited our nation’s capital building and while there, wandered unknowingly into a restricted area where they were challenged by a jealous guard: “Who do you think you are?” “Oh, just two of the owners”, one of the visitors replied.

Summers Countians are not only among the owners of Concord University but also the shapers of her destiny through its Board of Governors that was created by the state legislature in 2000. The Board has been led by two men from Summers who served 2-year terms as its chair – Jim Brown and Ted Rogers. Fellow members with Summers connections have included Gene Fife, Greg Allen, Susie Rogers, and Wilma Anderson.

Prior to the creation of the Board of Governors, Concord was guided by a Board of Advisors that at one time was chaired by Rachel Bussard Thompkins, a vice president at WVU and founder of the National Trust for Rural and Community Educations, and included Kayetta Durrett Meadows, President of the WV Education Association – both from Summers County. These two boards would lead the institution to a number of notable achievements: enrolled the greatest number of students in the institution’s history, created master’s programs in education and social work (business would be added later), strengthened faculty credentials, built the Erma Byrd Higher Education Center in Beckley and the Rahall Technology Center and Wilkes Family Chapel on campus, and supported the football team that competed for a national championship in 2011. The social work master’s was largely the handiwork of department chair Dr. John David Smith, who hailed from Summers and would later serve as Concord’s chief academic officer.

In 1974, Concord established a foundation to seek funds to provide “a margin of excellence” not attainable with only state funds. Ben Vest, assistant to Concord’s President at the time and originally from the Jumping Branch area led the team that

fashioned the Concord College Foundation. The Foundation's assets grew to \$54 million in 2022 when it awarded scholarships to 503 students, The growth of the Foundation is attributable to over 4,000 generous donors and the investment acumen of Summers native Greg Allen, former executive at Bank of America and chair of the Foundation's investment committee. Concord awarded Mr. Allen an honorary doctorate in 2022 in recognition of his exemplary service to the institution.

Other Summers Countians have volunteered their time, talent and treasure to the work of the Foundation: Doug Maddy (former President of the WV Bankers Association). Richard Lawrence (former Asst. Superintendent of SC Schools and co-founder of the Hinton Area Foundation) and Senator Lenard Anderson.

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Shifting to the present.....

For almost 25 years, Barbara Rush-Meador (CU 1990), counselor for the Upward Bound program, has assisted almost 400 Summers County students prepare for college, School principals, counselors and teachers have been her partners. Each year, 15 students, typically ninth graders, are selected for the program that supports them throughout high school and provides tuition-free college courses in the summer following graduation.

GearUp, a five-county effort supported by a \$21 million dollar grant, will provide tutoring and counseling services for 213 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students in the county (and 3,500 in four contiguous counties) and will continue to support them through graduation. Samantha Jones (CU, 2011) will coordinate the program locally with leaders in the school system and the parents and guardians of students. Success may depend on employing some of the one-room schoolhouse practices described in the book written by John Webb and published by the SC Historical Society.

The Bonner Scholars program enrolls 80 students at Concord who are preparing for lives of service. Students receive generous scholarships and are paid for six weeks of summers work for non-profit organizations. Moreover, small grants are available for the organizations that employ the students and the community. For example, the Hinton Area Foundation has benefited from the exceptional work of several students and from the purchase of software with one of the grants.

Severe teacher shortages and declining student achievement are causes of broad concern and for intelligent action. Although the "Grow Your Own" project, now underway, can positively affect teacher recruitment, it can be complemented by a

variety of initiatives that boost achievement and attract inspirational teachers. Confidence and trust born from the long association of community and university can be the catalyst for continued cooperation.

(Authors note: We are grateful to the Hinton News for the opportunity to trace the evolution over 150 years of the mutually beneficial relationships between Summers County and Concord.)

Editor's Note: One of the authors, Keith Lilly, is from our wonderful county. Here is some information on his life and achievements provided by his co-author, Jerry Beasley. "Keith Lilly has lived most of his life in Summers County. He graduated from Concord College with highest honors (summa cum laude) in history and political science. He continued his education at Virginia Tech, where he earned a master's in history. As a colleague of Dr. William O'Brien (another Summers Countian), he was a leader on two major projects aimed at improving the teaching of history in West Virginia schools. Currently, he is researching a biography of Confederate General John Echols."

**Dr. Jerry Beasley**

**We Salute you!**

