

# 2009 Business Leader of the Year ~ Emerson Gower ~



## **Gower Power** | By Julie Scott **Energizing South Carolina Business**

**E**merson Gower could have never guessed that, as a sixth grader growing up in his dad's grocery store in downtown Raleigh, N.C., he was embarking on a business career that would span four decades. But it was there, in his father's store, that Gower began learning about an honest day's work, the importance of relationships and what it takes to be successful in business and in life.

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**I**t was there I learned to run a business, take care of customer service and make all the customers happy," said Gower. Gower's father served as his mentor during those young years and throughout his life. Gower credits his father's strong work ethic with instilling those same values in him, which he would carry throughout his career with Carolina Power & Light (CP&L), now Progress Energy.



But it wasn't just in his young work life where Emerson Gower excelled. At Millbrook High School, he served as student council president, ran track and was captain of the varsity football team. His high school in Raleigh was small, and the close setting - he had just 69 in his graduating class - enabled him to learn the importance of teamwork and relationships.

"I was fortunate because small schools give you an opportunity for a

lot of leadership," he said.

Gower went on to college outside of Raleigh at Campbell University and also served two years in the Army in Munich, Germany, as a military policeman. At Campbell, he helped pay for school by playing trumpet in a band at fraternity parties and dances with his younger brother, who played the guitar. But, Gower still returned home often to help his dad with the store.

After graduation in 1970, Gower went to work and joined a Southern Pines civic group of young professionals called the Jaycees. In early 1975,



his community involvement crossed paths with Jane Evans. By August, they were married. While working in Raleigh, Gower became assistant to the chairman of the board of Carolina Power & Light. His boss, an advocate for business involvement in the community, had been chairman of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, introducing Gower to the importance of the business community's voice in the political process. Gower would never forget that charge,

and throughout his career, he made sure his company was at the table.

From there, Gower made his way to Sanford, then Cary, North Carolina, where he saw exponential growth first-hand. Within two years, the Cary office he opened went from growing at three percent the first year to 14 percent by the third year. In 1986, Gower commuted to Washington, D.C., to represent the company on legislative issues affecting CP&L customers, including clean air legislation.

In 1990, Gower moved to Florence, South Carolina, and took over the

district manager position for Carolina Power & Light. The couple's children were in the second and fifth grades at the time.

"They both got an excellent education in the Florence public schools, and both were Palmetto Scholars," said Gower. "Today one is a speech pathologist, and one soon will be a dentist."

### LIFELONG LESSONS: KNOW THE IMPRESSION YOU MAKE

**H**is personal philosophies can be traced back to his time in his father's grocery store, where image and reputation could make or break a business.

"I personally believe that image is everything, and anytime you are selling a product or a state, you've got to have a positive image surrounding that product," Gower said. "South Carolina is a great place to be. But, we've got to work on our image. That's what we've got to fix."

He hopes South Carolina can leverage the state's many positive attributes to convey across the world. This is particularly important in the age of global competition in which other companies and groups might play on misstated negative perceptions of South Carolina to advance their own causes. Countering that, Gower says, requires South Carolina's leaders to collaborate and speak with one voice.



### THE POWER OF EDUCATION AND INVOLVEMENT

**I**n addition to a career devoted to making businesses successful, Gower is passionate about education. He believes the first step in improving education is convincing all citizens it is important and critical for success. Students have to recognize learning is continuous in a global marketplace.

"Information becomes obsolete so quickly today. Students have to recognize that education is not just a four-year deal but an entire career of learning. There's got to be that hunger for education," Gower said.

His advice for young professionals is clear. Know the business you are in, inside and out. Put in the hard work, the time and the hours it takes to be successful. Treat employees fairly and with respect. Get involved in the political process and, even more importantly, make your community better.

"We only grow if our communities grow, and we're only successful if we are successful in the regulatory and political environment," he said. "Today every business, not just utilities, is more regulated. The message is business people have to be involved in their communities and must be involved politically because if they're not, they will not be able to operate effectively. It's critical."

Gower retired from Progress Energy July 1, 2009, but he remains involved in the political process because it is important to his community, his company



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and his state. He believes one of the most dangerous pieces of legislation for businesses in South Carolina and across the nation would be a federal climate change bill that doesn't recognize the complexity of the issue.

"I'm not worried

about power plants being built in South Carolina or the United States. I'm worried about plants being constructed in developing countries without environmental controls. If we're going to have an impact on global climate change, there must be an international answer. It's not an American issue. It's a world issue, and everybody has got to get on board."

His lifelong lessons learned along the way are simple. "I think in general you do your best not to make enemies. You try to make friends. If you disagree on an issue, you don't take it personally. You come back and work on the next project together."

**Emerson Gower's Fast Facts:**

- Hometown** – Raleigh
- Favorite Spot in S.C.** – Restaurants of Charleston
- Reading right now** - Pat Conroy's *South of Broad*
- Favorite Color** – Red
- Favorite Thing to Do on the Weekend** – Go to the beach
- People might be surprised to know that** – I played trumpet in college.
- In your spare time, you** – go for a walk, read
- Pet Peeves** – I like to do things quickly. Make a decision, and move on.

**A DESERVING RECIPIENT**

Of being honored as the 2009 Business Leader of the Year, Gower is modest. "None of us sets out trying to win awards," he says. "I have enjoyed my career so much. The act of what I have done over my career is rewarding in itself."

But state leaders have other ideas. "Emerson has been an absolutely invaluable asset to Florence, the Pee Dee region and the entire state of South Carolina," said South Carolina Senator Hugh Leatherman of Florence. "It is because of his leadership and hard work that our great state has become home to some of the largest and most financially well-suited corporations in the world. With the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce seeking to honor a businessman of the year, you could have selected no finer businessman, leader and friend than Emerson Gower."

Looking back, he does wonder how he got it all done sometimes and how Jane, a math professor at Francis Marion University, handled his career over the years. "She's attended more chicken dinners," he said with a chuckle. "She's been right there all along the way."

Today, though, they both cook together at their home in Florence. Though he and Jane will likely travel to France soon, his love for the Pee Dee and the entire state of South Carolina is evident. And, he still enjoys just seeing a lot of people, whether they are his former Progress Energy employees, Chamber members or fellow Pee Dee citizens.

Even in retirement, Gower still looks at new challenges as opportunities to learn about people and issues.

"I'll be the last one to leave a reception because I'm having such a good time," he says. "It's almost like it's a puzzle. You go into a room where you have all these different people from different walks of life with different occupations, and if you talk to all of those people, you are going to leave with a whole lot more than you came in with."

*Julie Scott is the public relations manager at the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce.*

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