



BY ROBERT FERRIER

His Honor, the **M**ayor

**Richard Arrington has taken his life full circle—
education to public service and back again.**



In September 1963, Richard Arrington Jr.—son of a black sharecropper—arrived at the University of Oklahoma's Department of Zoology. Three years later, armed with a Ph.D. and interpersonal skills gained from demanding, yet compassionate, professors, Arrington returned to his native Alabama. During the next three decades he would etch his name in Alabama history, spanning the chasm from academe to politics, serving eight years on the Birmingham City Council and 20 years as the southern bastion's first black mayor.

How did this Sumter County son rise to power in City Hall, leading Birmingham through racial strife, from economic bedrock to prosperity and recognition as one of the South's most progressive cities? How did OU shape his leadership abilities, arming him for crucial decisions along the way?

Arrington answered those questions on February 25 when he returned to Norman to receive a 2000 Distinguished Alumni Award from the OU College of Arts and Sciences. On this first visit in 34 years, he also presented a public lecture and renewed old friendships in the zoology department.

OU had been a crucible for Arrington, forging him from a raw graduate student to a confident scholar, teacher and leader.

The story began when Arrington and his wife arrived in Norman 37 years ago, after selecting OU over the University of Illinois, Southern Illinois and the University of Connecticut.

"Invertebrate zoology interested me, and Dr. Harley P. Brown's reputation in that area drew attention to OU," Arrington says. "As a result of Dr. Cluff Hopla's efforts on my behalf, the zoology department accepted me as a graduate student."

Arrington faced an immediate challenge—finding a home. Norman in the early '60s offered few residential opportunities to black families. After a frustrating search, the couple located an apartment on the University's south campus.

The young graduate student gained respect from his professors for his academic efforts. In addition to excelling in the classroom, he was elected the first black president of the Pi Sigma biological society and received the organization's Ortenberger Award for student leadership.

Arrington remembers three professors who shaped him as a scholar and as a man. "Dr. Richard Goff advised me as a new student. I got to know him at his home and in embryology classes. He showed compassion and concern for me.

"Dr. Harley Brown's reputation for tough classes intimidated me. However, I knew that if I performed there, I would be able to handle any coursework in the department. I learned so much from him, especially analytical thinking, that would help make my career. He and his wife invited me to travel with them in their van. They invited my wife and me to their home, embracing us with open arms. I doubt that he knows how much he contributed to my success, especially in writing skills.

"Finally, I remember Dr. Hopla, the department chair,

as a kind, compassionate advocate for black students. Dr. Hopla made sure that I took advantage of every educational opportunity."

Arrington received his Ph.D. in zoology in 1966 and returned to Alabama. After working four years in academic positions at Miles College, he assumed directorship of the Alabama Center for Higher Education. Arrington breathed new life into ACHE, building the staff from one to 30 and the budget from \$40,000 to over \$1,000,000. His fund raising and communication talents caught the attention of Birmingham's black leaders.

In the summer of 1971, with the South reeling from the turbulent racial struggles, the 37-year-old Arrington's life would change forever. Influential blacks and friends urged him to run for mayor of Birmingham.

He refused. "The timing wasn't right," he says.

Still convinced of Arrington's leadership, his supporters urged him to run for the Birmingham City Council. A staunch champion of equal rights, Arrington had observed the frustrating struggles of Birmingham's blacks to obtain jobs, higher living standards, educational opportunities and fair treatment by law enforcement. He realized that social change begins with decisions made in courthouses, city halls and legislative bodies.

Arrington won a city council seat in a runoff election. He served eight years, earning a reputation as a determined advocate for minorities and economic reform.

Arrington faced another critical decision in the summer of 1979. Birmingham's black community was in turmoil after a young black woman, Bonita Carter, had been shot and killed by a Birmingham policeman responding to a robbery call. Carter, a bystander, had been mistaken for an accomplice by the officer, George Sands.

"The black community urged that Sands be fired," Arrington recalls, "yet Mayor David Vann assigned him to desk duty."

Resentment from that decision pushed racial tensions to an all-time high in Birmingham. On August 21, ministers E. W. Jarrett and Abraham Woods pleaded with Arrington to run for mayor.

"As president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Woods spoke persuasively for the black community. I had admired him as a history professor when I served as academic dean at Miles College," Arrington says. "He looked at me and said, 'You should do this!' My wife, Rachel, sensed that I wanted to take this step. She supported my decision to follow my heart."

Arrington jump-started a grass-roots campaign with \$30,000, raised mostly from black churches. Despite being outspent significantly by his opponents—Mayor David Vann and City Councilman John Katopodis—Arrington won 44 percent of the total vote to force a runoff. Boosted by crossover white votes, Arrington won election with 51 percent.

The new mayor found his city in dire straits.

"I faced a combination of economic, political and social problems," he says. "Birmingham's unemployment exceeded 20 percent. U.S. Steel's work force had shrunk from 30,000 to 3,000. Their management assured me they would not



A 1979 White House guest of President and Mrs. Jimmy Carter was the newly elected mayor of Birmingham, Richard Arrington Jr., the first black ever to hold that office.

close; then they shut down in less than a week. The Fraternal Order of Police viewed the new black mayor as their enemy. Jobs drained from the inner city to the surrounding suburbs of Jefferson County. Black secondary schools struggled with inadequate funding. Employment opportunities for blacks and other minorities looked bleak.”

Arrington assembled a multi-racial staff and began the first stage of an economic development program. Enlisting the support of the administration at the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) and of corporate leaders, he set goals of improving the Birmingham City Center and neighborhood commercial districts, developing industrial parks and revitalizing the metropolitan area. Low-interest loans and other city incentives triggered a \$204 million investment in city projects by 137 firms, creating nearly 3,000 new jobs.

“We would never have moved forward as quickly without help from UAB,” he says. “The administration and faculty set up business incubators, recruited new firms, conducted economic studies and opened new jobs on campus. Business leaders helped early in my term also. Emil Hess, CEO of Parisian, a chain of apparel stores, stood up for me and took abuse for his troubles. . . . Joe Farley, at Alabama Power Company, offered advice. Jimmie Lee, a Pepsi-Cola executive, intervened on my behalf with corporate leaders several times. All three of these men made a difference.”

The mayor kicks off a “Stop the Violence” campaign at Birmingham’s Ensley Magnet High School in 1994.

“I faced a combination of economic,

Minority participation ranked high among Arrington’s other first-term objectives. Black city employment increased 50 percent, and employment of women increased 25 percent. City contracts to minority firms totaled \$18 million from 1980 to 1982.

“I took heat for creating set-aside programs for minorities,” Arrington says. “My predecessor, David Vann, earlier had reported \$2,000,000 in contracts to minority companies, but most of those were fronts set up by white contractors. I shut down some contractors in violation of the city’s affirmative action laws. The contractors’ association battled me in court every few months, and I lost some of those cases. Yet we succeeded eventually.”

Although he accomplished much in his first term, Arrington admits to a mistake on one decision. “I convinced the Jefferson County Citizens’ Coalition to run an all-black slate for five of the seats on the city council,” he says. “Only one black won a seat. The electorate sent a message to me—‘too much, too soon.’”

In 1989, business, civic and political leaders adopted his “Birmingham Plan,” a voluntary program guaranteeing that women and minorities share in the city’s growth. Recognized as a national model, the plan focused on minority participation in construction contracts in a five-county metropolitan area, accessibility to business and capital through two major public/private loan programs, a \$38 million home mortgage loan pool for low to moderate income families and recruitment and retention of minority professionals. Now minority businesses receive more than 30 percent of city contracts annually.

Arrington tackled public safety. By 1979, Birmingham’s crime rate had peaked after a 10-year upward trend.



political and social problems. Birmingham's unemployment exceeded 20 percent."

Arrington hired more police and increased training. By 1982 the rate dropped to the lowest level in seven years. The Police Department recorded a 75 percent decrease in police brutality complaints and a 25 percent reduction in the use of firearms by law enforcement officers.

The issue of race—long a social and political quagmire in Alabama—challenged Arrington personally during his first term. "I received threats," he says. "The police assigned a tactical unit to me 24 hours a day. At night they guarded my home. During the inauguration party, someone accidentally leaned against a light switch, and the room fell dark. I will never forget my daughter's scream. She thought we were under attack. The first week after my election, the FBI learned that the Klan had contracted to kill me. I received another threat after I alienated drug dealers by taking a stand against drug houses. An undercover police tape revealed that dealers had offered a \$10,000 contract on my life. My family and I worried throughout that time; but after the first year, the threats evaporated."

Over five consecutive four-year terms, Arrington continued to revitalize Birmingham, drawing national recognition in the areas of economic and community development, research and technology, urban planning and historic preservation. In 1983 and 1993 the city was voted one of the nation's "Most Livable Cities" by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Arrington has risen to national prominence for his leadership. He serves on the boards of many community organizations and was chosen in a *Birmingham News* survey as the "No. 1 City Leader" in 1989 and among the "Top Ten City Leaders" in 1992. *Ebony Magazine* selected him as one of "100 Most Influential Black Americans" from 1981-93. The National Urban Coalition chose him as the nation's "Most Distinguished Mayor" in 1988. In 1993, the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression presented Arrington the 20th Anniversary Human Rights Award.

Toward the end of his fifth term in 1999, Arrington felt the winds of change. One of his last two initiatives—a \$700 million metropolitan redevelopment program to be funded by a county one-cent sales tax—failed.

"An affluent ring of white suburban communities surrounds Birmingham," Arrington explains. "My plan received legislative support and passed in Birmingham proper. However, a city councilman representing the most affluent city community turned the vote into a race issue, and 99 percent of the outer ring voted against the plan. That disappointed me deeply.

"Then my last initiative—privatizing the municipal water system, putting it on the tax rolls, using the sale funds and investing the future income in a lifetime endowment to improve the school system and city's infrastructure—failed with black voters in Birmingham. Two city councilmen opposed the plan, and we received only 40 percent of the vote. At that point I felt I had contributed my best over the last 20 years. I had run dry of new ideas."

Arrington's life went full circle when he returned to higher education in September 1999. He works as visiting professor of public service at the University of Alabama-Birmingham and special consultant to Alabama State University in the Leadership and Public Policy Research Program.

His new positions allow him to observe "before and after" changes in higher education since leaving ACHE two decades earlier. "Overall quality has improved," he says. "The Alabama legislature prefers to spend money on grades K-12, but they have increased funding to colleges and universities, especially historically black institutions. Administrators no longer exclude blacks and other minorities from faculty and staff, and they compete for black student and teaching talent, in and out of state. The landscape has changed so much from those days at ACHE when I fought for every dollar of higher education money."

As Arrington charts the remainder of his life, this husband and father of eight children plans to make his mark in higher education through teaching, research and public service.

"I'm happy and stress-free now," he says. "At heart, I'm an educator who would have spent my life teaching had fate



Birmingham and its mayor, Richard Arrington, hosted the soccer venue for neighboring Atlanta's 1996 Olympic Games.

not intervened. The power of position, the ability to better our city, proved addictive and enjoyable, even as I despised the ceremonies. Yet, as I look back, I would live my life the same way, because public service enriched me and molded me into a better teacher."

A valuable resource for this article was the Richard Arrington Jr. biography, Back to Birmingham, University of Alabama Press (1989), by Jimmie Lewis Franklin, professor of history at Vanderbilt University, who received his 1964 master's and 1969 Ph.D. degrees in history from the University of Oklahoma.