

# Honoring the Heroes Among Us

## Robert L. Ulrich: A Lifetime of Service from “Mr. Downtown”

By Brant A. Bailey

**R**obert L. “Bob” Ulrich is a fearless, gifted, personable, humble visionary leader who has created, developed, directed and led organizations, firms and companies for forty-five years here in St. Petersburg. In fact, he could easily be known as “Mr. Downtown.”

When Bob returned to his hometown of St. Petersburg in 1959 with Barbara, his bride of four years and two small children, real estate was dead. Bob remembers it being so bad you could not give land away. Even though his wife was a schoolteacher and he was working full-time, their combined salaries amounted to approximately \$6,000 per year in those early years. Bob recalls that Barbara was paid as little as \$3,000 as a first grade teacher. Thus, a purpose and a goal were forged from early financial realities. Bob and Barbara would now devote a large part of their energy to helping St. Petersburg attract and keep young people and their families. The adventure began.

Bob's paternal grandparents moved to St. Petersburg in 1912. His father worked his way up from circulation manager to general manager at the St. Petersburg Times from the late 1920's to the early 1930's. Bob was born at St. Anthony's Hospital in 1933 and he graduated from St. Petersburg High School in 1951. Thereafter, he attended Duke University and received a B.A. in Political Science in 1955. Bob met his future wife, the former Barbara Ann Woodworth at Duke.

In the 1980s, while Bob was practicing law with Harris, Barrett, Mann and Dew a few prominent businessmen in St. Petersburg recruited Bob to run for Mayor of St. Petersburg. At first, Bob rejected the offer. On his way to a meeting to advise his recruiters of his decision not to run, he changed his mind. Bob's desire to help improve St. Petersburg's economic vitality changed his mind. Bob was elected and re-elected for 2 two-year terms from 1987-1991. He made \$23,000 per year as a “weak” mayor. An important difference between the “weak” mayor and the present “strong” mayor structure, aside from the amount of compensation paid, is that the “weak” mayor did not have to supervise city employees.

By 1987, St. Petersburg had a vision for Major League Baseball. After 1987, with Bob at the helm, city leadership implemented a five-part plan that would encourage the private sector to be more active downtown. In 1987 the downtown revenue base was less than 1% while healthy downtown urban communities produced 15-20% of the total city ad valorem tax base. New projects would prove to help. For example, the five -part plan involved developing Bay Plaza, the renovation of six blocks of downtown, renovating the Pier, finishing the Dome, annexing 1,100 acres and

modernizing the Bayfront Center. Also, Bob came to believe that 80% of business development or growth comes from existing local business instead of outside recruiting.

Bob's involvement in the banking business came from the fact that his law firm had represented a number of banks since the 1960s. In 1974, he was an Organizing Director of the Bank of Florida (Southtrust Bank of West Florida) and served as Chairman of the Board for approximately twenty years. Also, Bob served as Chairman of the Board, President and CEO from 1976 to 1979 of Bankers Insurance Company and Bankers Life Insurance Company of Florida.

While Bob has been a successful lawyer and business man, he strongly believes in community service. He is currently a trustee and an executive committee member of the Salvador Dali Museum. He has been Vice Chairman for Economic Development of the Board of Governors of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce, trustee of YWCA and YMCA and President of St. Petersburg Progress. In addition, Bob has served as a trustee for Florida Southern College in Lakeland. Bob believes that “Chamber” membership is important for anyone, lawyer or businessman, who is interested in improving the economic quality of a city.

Bob and Barbara's goal, from the beginning, has been to help promote St. Petersburg as a place where young people, like their own children, would want to work and raise their families. Therefore, they have also had an eye on promoting St. Petersburg's cultural development. Accordingly, Bob, never one to avoid leadership responsibilities, has been Chairman of the Florida Gulf Coast Symphony (now the Florida Orchestra) and in the mid 70s he served as Chairman of the St. Petersburg Arts Commission.

Bob has also been a life-long member of the First United Methodist Church, where he has continued his commitment to community service. He is presently an Adult Sunday School teacher, the Lay Leader and General Counsel of his downtown church. Where else would his church be located other than downtown St. Petersburg? Bob served as a Senior High Sunday School teacher at the church for 25 years. He has also served as Chairman of the Administrative Board, the Finance Committee, Chairman of the Long Range Planning Committee, Chairman of the Staff Parish Relations Committee and a Trustee.

Barbara has also served in many roles as a volunteer. For example, she has served two years as President of the Shorecrest Parent Association,



served on the Advisory Board of the Salvation Army, been active in the Junior League and she has chaired three committees for her church.

Not surprisingly, Bob's four children ages 38 to 48 years of age have decided to stay in St. Petersburg. More specifically, Bob and Barbara's oldest daughter, Lisa is a commercial realtor. Their oldest son, Kurt, who now has four children of his own, is President of Ultroid Technologies, Inc. a medical device manufacturer. Kurt has also been involved with K-Life of St. Petersburg Inc., a Christian teen ministry. Trent is a money manager for Morgan Stanley and Trish is a pharmaceutical representative of Johnson and Johnson and an active member of the Junior League of St. Petersburg.

Bob's life of service and leadership could be summed up by using the following eight (8) words or phrases that all begin with the letter “P”: Parent, Parishioner, Public Service, Private Sector Developer, Pillar of Community Involvement, Practice of law and Pilot. Mr. Downtown has certainly done it all, while helping to make St. Pete the great city it is.

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