

Rep. Darren Jackson

Leadership Doesn't Stop at the Political

By Ben Brown, NCLM Advocacy Communication Associate

Rep. Darren Jackson has known since youth that the term “leader” was not reserved solely to describe holders of a political office.

“My parents were not political in any way,” he said. “I’m not even sure I could tell you who they voted for.” Instead, they set an example for him for hard work, with service in civic groups like the Jaycees, which both of his parents were active in, his father at the statewide level. “We were always doing something. Selling jelly for the (North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center). Balloons for the heart. We were always doing things for others,” he said. “That type of community service was something that I grew up in. But it wasn’t politics.”

A state lawmaker first appointed in 2009, Representative Jackson represents much of eastern Wake County, of which he’s a native, and showcases his own community service background in his legislative office in Raleigh. On its walls are photos of his family and of various local leadership roles he’s held over the years. He pointed to an all-smiles photo of him with his son’s soccer team, which he coached. “I keep that up there as a reminder to me that there are other ways to give back to the community,” he said.

But, one year ago, Representative Jackson’s colleagues in the House

Democratic wing added a twist. They named him House Minority Leader, placing him at the front lines of the political process as the chief facilitator of his caucus and negotiator with the majority party. So he stuck with his roots. “My whole legislative philosophy has always been to make a bad bill better,” he told the News & Observer when he took the reins. “I think to the extent you can run amendments and make things better, you have a duty to do that instead of sitting on the sidelines and saying no to everything.” He fleshed that out in a recent interview with *Southern City*.

Functionally, what do you do as minority leader?

A lot of what I do is dealing with the (Democratic) caucus and trying to bridge the gap as far as information. You know, (House Speaker Tim Moore) has a large staff, a lot of members, and because they (Republicans) are the majority party, they know what they’re going to do.... We don’t have the staff to deal with that. We don’t have somebody to put out our press releases or schedule. We just don’t have that. So a lot of what I do is the job that several staff members, frankly, would take care of. And I have to have good relationships with Republican members in the hope

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that we can share some information and so I can let our people know. Our job is not to just stand in the way and say “no, no, no” to everything the majority wants. But ... sometimes we have to say “no.” Especially when you represent four municipalities, five municipalities. A lot of the time (when significant proposals



House Minority Leader Darren Jackson in his legislative office in Raleigh. Photo credit: Ben Brown

are moving through the legislative process) you want to check with the mayors of all five towns or the public works department in all five towns or the police chief of all five towns.... I'm here in Raleigh, but we have (caucus) members (in far-flung parts of the state) or in rural areas that don't have the News & Observer or WRAL blaring what's going on.... So we try to get our members information about what's going on, what to expect.

You mentioned good relationships with members of the majority party. In that dynamic, you need to represent the values of your caucus

but also find a way to build a sense of teamwork with a different political party and philosophy. Do you have any lessons on building that sense of teamwork and consensus?

You can use a lot of expressions that people say, but "you can disagree without being disagreeable" is one of my favorites. I have really good friends that are Republicans, on the other side of the aisle. And I notice their job sometimes is to make a motion to table something that I'm trying to put forth (like a proposed amendment to a bill), in order to keep their members from taking a hard vote. I can't take that personally. They're not doing that

because Darren is standing up to do something. They're doing it because the minority leader is standing up, and they need to protect their members. At the same time, they realize that I have to ask hard questions.... Again, it's nothing personal, but that is my job. And I hope at the end of the day, we all have enough respect for what we're doing to follow the rules and treat each other with respect. Now, there are some bills, some issues that are very emotionally charged. But you've got to just leave it in the chamber, in my opinion. I've found that my legal training goes a long way in that regard. When you're in law school, you do these things called "moot

court,” where they give you a case. It’s a competition, you flip a coin -- you’re the plaintiff or you’re the defendant -- and you’ve got to know how to argue both sides, and they usually give you a case that’s pretty down-the-middle and could go either way. And so you learn not to take it personally, not to get personally invested, so you can do the best job you can for your client. Well, I feel like it’s my job to do the best job that I can for my members, the Democrats, and my constituents back home. Of course, there will be emotionally charged issues and things that I feel very passionate about -- that’s why I wanted to serve -- but I try not to take it personally when someone who disagrees with me stands up and argues for a different position.

Speaking of that, was there any particular issue that inspired you to run and serve in the legislature? You’re in your fifth term now, but you’ve also got the demands of a law practice and a family. What brought you here?

I’ve always been interested in the political process. But what originally attracted me to this was the ability to represent eastern Wake County. Growing up in eastern Wake County, there’s always been a feeling that it was on the short end of the stick when it came to county funding, schools. Right or wrong, that was the feeling. So when this seat was first drawn (with the 2002 House district maps), that was the first time I ran for the office. I didn’t win, but

then the opportunity presented itself in 2009.... I am a lawyer, and one of the things that’s attractive about the General Assembly to me, is that it is part time -- even though it’s not as part time as it should be. It’s part time, so I can still practice law and still have my profession and didn’t have to wait until I’ve retired. Now, a lot of that is because I live in Wake County. It is very difficult for someone from Charlotte or Asheville or Manteo to do what I do, to be a legislator and have a professional career -- no matter what the career is. It’s very hard on people. We have become more of a full-time legislature...and it’s a strain on a lot of people. I always tell people that anytime someone resigns or retires mid-term in the legislature, a lot of the time they’ll say “I’m doing it to spend more time with family.” And then people in the media and the people outside of here will kind of question that and say, “I wonder what the real story is.” Look -- I have no doubt they’re telling the truth. Because, when you don’t get to see your kids for three or four nights a week because you have to serve up here? I don’t have that pressure. I go home every night, kiss my kids goodnight, take them to school the next morning. So I’m very lucky. There’s no way I could do it for as long as I have without being in my location, and having great law partners that allow me to serve.

And so you saw the House as the best way to stand up for your part of the county, as opposed to other elected office.

I wasn’t interested in running for a judgeship that would be giving up my law practice or anything that involved

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Representative Jackson with the House's former minority leader, Larry Hall. Photo credit: Corey Lowenstein of the News & Observer of Raleigh

moving from where I live. I don't live in a municipality where I could run for town board or mayor. (Editor's note: Representative Jackson lives in the unincorporated Shotwell community, just outside of Knightdale.) The smallest thing I could run for would be county commissioner ... where you'd have to run countywide. So, House was actually, at the time I ran, was actually the smallest office I could run for (laughter). And for it being part time, it worked out perfectly.

So you're a native. How have you seen eastern Wake County change since you were young?

(It was a) rural area of the county, especially growing up. My high school, East Wake, was built on a tobacco field. Friends of mine farmed, had tobacco farms. As you got into my teenage years, you saw less of that. But we were still a very agriculture-centric community.

But then, as the growth of Wake County started off, you started seeing a lot more people moving to the area that were commuting to Raleigh to work.... Now, you've got subdivisions where tobacco fields used to be. But it was nice and quiet, I went to all of the public schools, which was great. I was sure I would never move. I was lucky to find a law firm in the area that was hiring when I got out of school so I didn't have to go to Raleigh. I was looking for more of a family-friendly firm, somewhere that if I wanted to take off at 4 o'clock to go to a baseball game, they wouldn't give me a problem. I'm in my 21st year of practice now.

Why did you pick law?

That is a really good question. And I'm sure that the answer is probably my parents pushed me. My mom had a nursing degree, which at that time was one year of nursing school. My dad

didn't graduate high school. I was going to get a college education, probably a professional degree. I don't remember them saying, "You're going to be a lawyer." But I do remember the push for education, and then the first time I remember really thinking that being a lawyer would be cool was reading "To Kill a Mockingbird" for the first time. Now, I'm not saying that's when I decided that, but that's the first time I remember thinking it. Of course practicing law is nothing like that....

But just the themes of the book and the sense of justice...

Yeah, and so I went to (the University of) Carolina for undergrad. I think I went planning to be a lawyer, but certainly a political science major. It's not that I liked to argue. It's nothing like that. It was just with my family saying, "You're going to be the first in our family to go to college, get a professional degree." I think I would have enjoyed medicine, but that's a lot of school (laughter).

With your legislative service, do you have a good line of communication with the local government officials in your district?

I believe I do. I try to be accessible to them. One of the things about redistricting is that with the (House district lines) dividing some of the towns, they ended up with two members, which could be kind of a hassle. But the way it worked out is they have a Republican and a Democrat representing them. So they can go to either (Republican Representative Chris) Malone (whose district covers northeast Wake County) or myself, or we can

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work together on local bills. I can't think of a local bill that the towns have wanted that we haven't been able to get done.... But yeah, I have a great relationship with the towns. In Zebulon, it's probably because my firm was operating as town attorney. My boss was town attorney there for 10 to 15 years. So I knew all the people who worked at the Town of Zebulon. In Knightdale, I went to school with all of them. Garner, my next door neighbor is the town manager. So if he needs anything, he knows exactly where to find me (laughter). That's kind of the fun part, being able to help out your constituents like that.

With all the different staffing roles you fill by yourself in constituent communication, caucus communication and so on, how do you unwind and find time for yourself?

I like to go to movies. Movies are just my way of relaxing. The phone's off. Nobody's bothering you. I average a movie a week, at the theater. My children all love going to the movies as well. So, kids movies, space movies, romantic comedies with my wife. It's a good way to zone out. But I worked when I was in law school. I was

working full time and doing school. I'm used to doing stuff all the time. You become very efficient with your time. Every night, before I go to bed, I take out a note card – I keep these on my nightstand – and write down everything I've got to do for the next day. You mark it off – I've got my interview at 3 o'clock – you mark that off when it's done. Then I try to clear my mind. Being well organized is very important for being able to get things done. Again, I have great law partners. I have a great family.

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