

Charles Somerville Harris

AUGUST 22, 1951 – DECEMBER 7, 2022



A man who inspired, mentored, and helped shape the careers of hundreds, Charles Somerville Harris went on to eternal rest on December 7, 2022. His wit, sharp focus, and steadfast loyalty to friends, relatives and colleagues will be deeply missed.

Charles S. Harris, grandson of Lillian Somerville Jones and Earnest Alonzo Jones of Portsmouth VA and Laura Bell Pulliam Harris and Charlie Johnson Harris of Red Oak VA, was the son of the late Dorothy Jones Harris and Robert Otis Harris.

Born in Richmond, VA and reared in Clarksville, VA he joined Second Baptist Church. He attended segregated schools - Hollow Rock and Central Elementary and West End High School in Mecklenburg County. At an early age he began to work on the family farm, a practice he continued until he left for college.

Upon graduation from high school, he enrolled at Hampton Institute (University), receiving a degree in Mass Media Arts in 1973. As an undergraduate he was active in campus life, serving as an announcer and subsequently manager of the campus radio station. He was also active in student affairs. After earning his degree, he began a career on the campus of Hampton as a media services employee at the University Nursing School. Later in 1973 Harris worked at Newsweek Magazine as an intern staff writer.

In 1974 he was admitted to the University of Michigan Graduate School of Journalism. Concurrently he worked in the U of M Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, initially in media services and progressing to the title of Assistant Director of Athletics. In the latter position he was responsible for facility operations and marketing.

In 1974 Harris married his college sweetheart Lenora Billings formerly of Passaic NJ.

In 1979 Harris accepted the position of Director of Intercollegiate Athletics and Recreation at the University of Pennsylvania. With this appointment he became the first African American and youngest person to serve as Athletic Director at an IVY League school. He served the University of Pennsylvania until 1985 when he accepted the position of Director of Athletics at Arizona State University, making him the first African American to serve as Athletic Director at an NCAA Division I program and was the first to serve in this capacity in the Pacific-10 Conference. Harris and his wife formed Excel Development Systems, Inc. (now UbuntuGlobal) a consulting practice in 1986.

In 1996 Harris accepted the position of Commissioner of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, a position he held until his resignation in 2003. In 2004 he was named Director of Athletics at Averett University, making him the first African American appointed in the USA South Athletic Conference. In 2007 he took on the additional title of Vice President of Student Services,

subsequently he was named Executive Vice President of the University, both firsts for an African American at that institution. Harris retired from Averett in 2021.

Harris served on nearly 30 NCAA committees including Chair of the NCAA Division I Management Council 2002, and the NCAA Men's Basketball Selection Committee -from 1992 to 1999. Over the course of his career, no less than 14 individuals that he hired went on to become major college Athletic Directors.

In 2010 he received the Pioneer Award from the McLendon Foundation, part of the National Association of College Directors of Athletics (NACDA). He had been previously identified as one of the Outstanding Young Men in America and One of Eighty People to Watch in 1980 by Philadelphia Magazine. He was recognized by the All-America Sports Foundation for a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997 and the All-America Sports Foundation Commissioners Award in 2000. In 2000 he received the Leadership Award from the National Collegiate Athletic Association. He has cited by the United Negro College Fund with a Donor Recognition Award. He was inducted into the West End High School Sports Hall of Fame in 2001.

In 2016 Averett University announced that the future construction of the athletic field house will be named the Charles S. Harris Field House. Construction is projected to begin in 2024.

In 2008 he was selected to serve on the Board of Directors of American National Bank and American National Bankshares, a publicly traded company. He also served on the Regional Advisory Board of Branch Banking and Trust. He served the community as a member of Big Brothers Big Sisters, Tempe Sports Authority, The Greensboro Sports Commission, President of the Danville Pittsylvania County chapter of Habitat for Humanity and the Foundation board of the Danville Science Center.

A jazz aficionado, 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle dissectologist, watch collector, and proud co - owner of the Harris family farm, he and his wife traveled extensively visiting countries on six continents. Having accumulated more than two million miles in travel on a single airline, he was named as Flying Colonel by Delta Airlines. He devoted considerable energy to tracing the genealogical roots of the Harris and Somerville families.

He was a Life Member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, the Sigma Pi Phi Boule, and is included in the NAACP list of Who's Who in America.

He is pre-deceased by his parents Robert Otis and Dorothy Jones Harris. He is survived by his wife of 48 years, Lenora Billings-Harris of Greensboro, one sister, Hon. Lillian Harris Ransom of Philadelphia PA, half-brother's in-law Arthur Billings (Andrea) Odenton MD, Tracee Billings (Quinnetta) of Haledon, NJ, numerous cousins, nieces, nephews, and friends.

The Celebration of Life will be held Saturday, December 17, 2022 at 11:00 am at Hanes Lineberry Funeral North Elm Chapel, 515 N. Elm Street, Greensboro, NC 27401, 336-272-5157. The service will also be livestreamed. His ashes will eternally rest in the Harris family cemetery in Red Oak, VA.

In lieu of flowers the family requests contributions be made to: Averett University, 420 West Main St., Danville VA 24541, Averett Ascending Capital Campaign, designated for the Charles S. Harris Field House <https://www.averett.edu/giving/harrisfieldhouse/>
Fond memories and expressions of sympathy may be shared at www.haneslineberryfhnorthelm.com for the Harris family