

He Beat the Odds

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Covington Commissioner Stricker Overcame Adversity in Life

COVINGTON - As city commissioner Jerry Stricker knows, it takes hard work and determination to get from the west side of Newport to the West Wing of the White House.

Stricker rose from humble means in Newport to become chief financial officer of a large investment firm to working in the Clinton White House, and is now helping guide the City of Covington into the 21st century. However, it hasn't always been easy.

The fifth child of Clarence and Frieda Stricker grew up on Newport's West Side, moving from rental property to rental property as family economics dictated. The moving stopped, however, when he was a freshman at Newport High School. His oldest brother, Robert, died in World War II and a small payment from the government allowed the Strickers to buy their first home on Columbia Street. Unfortunately, just a couple of years later, Clarence Stricker passed away when Jerry was 17 years old.

Stricker persevered through those two tragedies and, while not the best student; he managed to get accepted to the University of Kentucky. Because his family was unable to send money from home and financial aid didn't go very far, he had to work his way through school. It took him seven years to graduate with his accounting degree, but he put it to immediate good use.

Young Stricker passed his Certified Public Accountant's exam and went to work for one of the biggest accounting firms of the day, Arthur Young & Company, now part of Ernst & Young. After six years there, he became controller of local investment firm Gradison & Co. (now McDonald Investments, owned by Key Bank), eventually becoming CFO. In 1991 he spearheaded the merger with McDonald investments.

"I did 95 percent of the negotiations. It was the most exciting thing I did from a business standpoint. We made a lot of money and I was able to retire at 55," Stricker explained.

Time For Politics

This early retirement allowed him time to delve deeper into politics.

Sparked by his father's activities with the VFW and American Legion, politics was always an interest for Stricker. He made his first political contribution in 1971 to Wendell Ford's campaign for governor.

"One hundred dollars! I thought, "Wow, that's a lot of money,"" Stricker laughed.

From there, politics took him to Miami in 1972 as a guest at the Democratic Convention that would eventually nominate George McGovern.

"After that, I got the bug and enjoyed working behind the scenes," he remembered.

All that work behind the scenes got the attention of those at the front. Kenton County Judge-executive Jim Dressman appointed him to the Kenton County Airport Board, where he served for 11 years, eventually becoming chairman. Later, Gov. Martha Layne Collins appointed him to the UK Board of Trustees. There, Stricker helped in the hiring of basketball coach Rick Pitino and athletic director C.M. Newton.

On the campaign trail with Sen. Wendell Ford in support of the 1992 Clinton campaign, Stricker told the senator, "I'd like to work in the White House." After the inauguration, Sen. Ford arranged an interview with Tipper Gore's chief of staff, Skila Harris.

"It was fun just being interviewed in the White House," Stricker remembered.



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LATEST STOP: Covington City Commissioner Jerry Stricker's political career includes time spent working in Washington, D.C. while the Clinton Administration was in power.

When nothing came of the interview, Stricker persevered again, offering to become a volunteer. The White House accepted.

"I moved around to different departments. I didn't do anything earth-shaking but it was just fun to be there. I love Washington, I love history, and I love politics. It was just a natural thing."

From the Beltway Back to NKY

His volunteer work was eventually noticed. He was appointed and-after Senate confirmation-served on the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board that administers the federal employees' retirement savings plan. Stricker then served on the Pension Benefit Guarantee Board (PBGC) that oversees traditional corporate pension plans.

Then on August 23, 2001 (his birthday), the PBGC called to say that he had been replaced by the Bush administration.

His service at the federal level at an end, Stricker turned his eyes back home to NKY. Earlier, Covington Mayor Butch Callery asked him to serve out the remaining nine months of Commissioner Denny Bowman's term, who'd resigned to become the city's recreational director in 2000. Stricker accepted. Looking back on that first stint as commissioner, he said, "I enjoyed it. We accomplished some things and lots of people asked me to run."

He ran in 2002 and lost.

"But I enjoyed the process-meeting the people and going door-to-door," Stricker said. Persistent again, he ran last year and won a seat on the commission.

Fellow accountant Scott Malof was happy with his election.

"Jerry doesn't need to work and he doesn't have an ax to grind. He's just a good guy and really cares about the city," Malof said.

Tragedy and a Mission

There were more rough times along the way. He suffered through a divorce and then in 1994, in what Stricker calls "the tragedy of my life," his daughter Kim committed suicide.

"She graduated from UK, just got her master's degree from UC (University of Cincinnati) in speech language pathology and had done her internship in Naples, Fla. She had everything to live for, but the depression got to her."

Stricker's other two children, Melanie and Jeff, both live in NKY.

Stricker has continued to persevere.

"My mission in life is to help. All those things that I did, I enjoyed it, but I was also helping. I'm a person who came from modest means and was able to make a lot of money in my life and I'm giving it back. I don't forget where I came from," he said.

To prove it, Stricker has said he would donate his first year of city commission salary to Covington-based charities.