



A Tribute to Rodney Berry

President of the Public Life Foundation
of Owensboro from 2000-2016

The Public Life Foundation (then the Community Life Foundation) was created by John and Marjorie Hager in 1996 with funds from the sale of the Messenger-Inquirer. Berry joined the foundation four years later, putting John Hager's vision of civic empowerment on issues of public policy into practice.

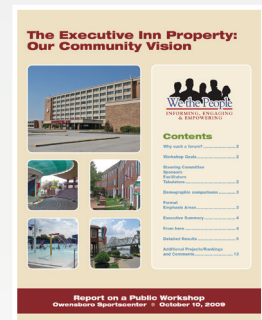
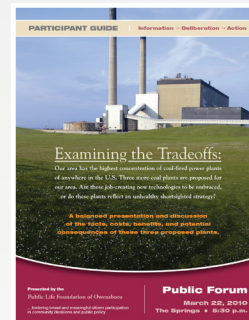
Under Rodney Berry's leadership, the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO) was a community catalyst in fostering civic engagement on local issues. For 16 years, Berry has been the face of the foundation and its chief strategist.

Public forums

Throughout Berry's tenure at the foundation, numerous public forums were organized around many local issues.

- What is the best use of the city's Hillcrest Golf Course?
- What are the tradeoffs of additional coal plants in the region?
- What should be done with the Executive Inn Property?

Berry gathered information on all sides of each issue, organized public forums to discuss the topic, and helped citizens organize to take action. This "information-deliberation-action" model drove much of Berry's work at the foundation. The usefulness of this process can be seen in two major projects led by Berry.



The People's Health Project, grounded in a University of Kentucky study funded by PLFO, led to extensive public discussions on the health needs of Daviess County. The Citizens Health Care Advocates grew out of this effort, keeping public attention on the area's health priorities for years after the public forum.



Another major forum centered on Owensboro's aesthetic appeal. That research and subsequent discussion led to the founding of PRIDE, a group that took on projects aimed at improving the look of Owensboro's public spaces.



Town meetings: “We the People”

However, few events could top Berry’s successful organization of two major town forums. Held in 2007 and 2010, the all-day discussions focused on setting priorities for the community. Over 600 people attended the 2007 meeting, spending the day deliberating the most important needs of the Owensboro area. A report on the day’s conclusions outlined, among other things, the top 20 recommendations these citizens had for the community.

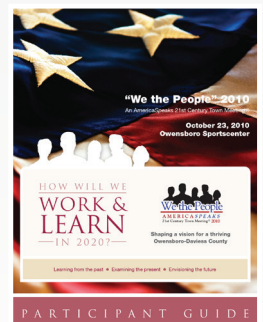


Berry and Keith Sanders, executive director of the Hager Educational Foundation, enjoy a brief break at the day-long town forum.

The “We the People” forums were equivalent to the historic town meetings held in the early part of this country’s history—but with more research and lots more technology for polling the opinions of the participants. “I think the “We the People” town hall meetings were something Rodney was proud of accomplishing,” said Bruce Hager, chair of the foundation’s board.



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Owensboro Dental Clinic

Berry was also instrumental in the establishment of a community dental clinic in Owensboro in 2009. The clinic, staffed by paid dentists, serves Medicaid-eligible and uninsured patients in the seven-county Green River District. When the clinic began its work, 55 percent of children in the community did not receive dental care.

“It took a lot of contributors [to make the clinic a reality],” said Keith Sanders, executive director of the Lawrence and Augusta Hager Educational Foundation, “but we wouldn’t have the dental clinic without the exemplary leadership of Rodney Berry.”

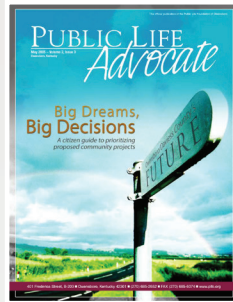
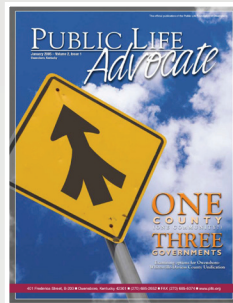


Public Life Advocate

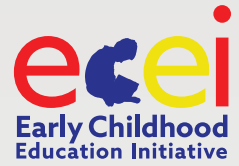
And one cannot forget Berry's work as the editor—and often the principal writer—of the *Public Life Advocate*, a regular publication of the foundation. The *Advocate* focused on public issues, providing research that looked at all sides of the policy. That research was often the basis for framing alternatives open to the community, laying out in an even-handed way the pros and cons of each alternative.

"The *Public Life Advocate* was one of the best magazines of its kind I have ever seen," said Dave Boeyink, Berry's successor at the foundation. "You couldn't read an issue without being smarter and better prepared to understand what was at stake on important public policies."

Berry's writing and the professional design made it a joy to read. It was a perfect vehicle for the mission of the foundation: engaging citizens in well-informed discussions on complex issues.



The Early Childhood Education Initiative



In the last few years of Berry's tenure, the foundation's focus shifted from civic engagement to youth and education. From 2013 to 2015, grants totaling \$1.3 million were made to ten local groups whose interests were on youth and/or education.

An even larger project is now being developed. The Public Life Foundation has pledged up to \$4 million—its largest project ever—to an Early Childhood Education Initiative. At present, 50 percent of Daviess County's four-year-olds are not prepared to succeed in kindergarten. The foundation hopes to organize the Owensboro community behind programs that would get more of its children kindergarten-ready.

Until recently, that project has been proceeding under Berry's leadership. Though Berry needed to resign for medical reasons, the foundation is in a position to move that project forward in 2017 thanks to his work. "We are going to do everything we can to make sure this effort is as successful as his past community projects," Boeyink said.

"The Public Life Advocate was one of the best magazines of its kind I have ever seen."

Dave Boeyink

"He is everywhere."

While we can point to many specific achievements of Berry's work at the foundation, his total community impact is harder to get your arms around.

His calendar was filled with meetings that sometimes ran from early morning to late in the evening. He was a great listener, turning his empathy for people facing serious problems—such as the lack of affordable dental care—into realistic solutions.

"He was successful in helping many grassroots organizations," said Sally Wood, a director of the

PLFO board. "And he was quick to respond to adverse community issues, such as when we heard the Ku Klux Klan was coming into town."

In fact, it is hard to find a place in the community that has not felt Berry's influence, whether small or large, benefitting from his understanding of the community and his eagerness to help make it a better place to live. "The contributions of Rodney Berry simply can't be catalogued," Boeyink said. "He is everywhere."

Chronicling an Amazing Career

The Right Person

Rodney Berry has been the right person for so many times and places - the perfect catalyst to move persons and events for greater good in our community. Boulware Mission's incredible transformation in the first half decade of this century is another example.

Rodney was on Boulware's Board of Directors. He had the intellect, vision, wisdom, courage, endurance, humor and deep understanding of the community to effect change. His calm and steady work and counsel on the Board set standards for everyone else. The Board was able to unify and move toward the goal of purchasing and remodeling the former Passionist Monastery on Wing Avenue. This dramatic task involved hundreds of thousands of dollars and genuine risk. Success would triple Boulware's ability to provide shelter, licensed substance abuse treatment services and life skills to those most desperately needing help. Failure could destroy the critical functions in our community provided by the Mission for the previous 80+ years.

Working with Rodney will remain one of the greatest privileges in my life. He made all of us want to be better men and women - and he succeeded.

Bill Craig

Former Officer and Board Member
Boulware Mission, Inc.

Rodney Berry graciously and enthusiastically accepted an invitation from the Kentucky Rough Riders to facilitate a 2015 presentation exploring "The War on Poverty – 50 Years of Social Action: Was It Worth the Cost?" As president of the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro, Rodney shared important insights gleaned from a public forum hosted by the PLFO that explored this topic.

The information he shared sparked challenging questions and conversations among our members, which continue to resonate with us even two years later.

Rodney's program, which was presented in such a thoughtful and approachable manner that invited everyone to contribute, was a highlight of our club's history.

Respectfully submitted –

Lora Wimsatt

President
Kentucky Rough Riders
kyroughriders@gmail.com

I have known Rodney Berry since our days as students at Western Kentucky University. Rodney has always been a model citizen, the kind any community would be glad to have. As a teacher at Brescia or a board member with the Owensboro Area World Affairs Council, whenever I asked Rodney for assistance on any project, he was always one of the community's greatest and most helpful supporters.

Charles Boteler

There would not be a RiverPark Center if it were not for Rodney Berry.

Rodney and I had been working together on plans for downtown since the late 70's after we both returned from college. While I was working at the Owensboro Chamber, Rodney helped Dr. Don Neel and the Chamber develop plans for creating Downtown Owensboro, Inc., and Rodney was hired as the first executive director. Among the ideas we had for downtown was the creation of a civic center for artistic performances, community events, etc. Eventually, in the early 80's we approached City Hall with the idea of building such a facility but received a polite response that there was no interest.

A few years went by and with Rodney's support in 1986, I decided to run for mayor with downtown revitalization as a major part of my rationale for running and a central plank of my campaign platform. Rodney managed my campaign, raised money, coordinated volunteers, designed advertisements, and generally organized the effort. Fortunately, we were successful and within a few weeks of the election in 1987, we announced our plans for the center, obtained a pledge from Governor Wallace Wilkinson and House Speaker Don Blandford for the state to contribute \$4.5 million (to be matched with private funds we promised to raise) and, as mayor, I appointed a 40-member board to oversee the project. With my encouragement, that board hired Rodney to employ architects, oversee the planning, raise the \$4.5 million (more than \$10 million was eventually raised) and build the center.

It was a risky venture. We were raising the money while we were building the center. Rodney was the middle of the project, calling the meetings of various committees, coordinating the fund-raising, working with John L. Kirkpatrick (Kirk's father and local contractor) to oversee the construction and to manage the finances. Rodney worked 70 and 80-hour weeks, often starting with an early breakfast meeting and going through a busy day that was capped off with yet another committee meeting. He was tireless and the RiverPark Center stands – 25 years later – as a monument to his hard work and determination.

With the opening of the RiverPark in September, 1992, (more than 10 years after it was first conceived), Rodney's construction and fundraising role morphed into the duties of the running the center, staffing up with professionals and countless volunteers, booking events, coordinating the various user groups like the Owensboro Symphony and Theatre Workshop and recruiting educational programs for thousands

of school children in the region to experience the arts. Although our original plans for the use of the RiverPark were truly ambitious, our imaginations weren't big enough in the early years to conceive of all the weddings that would take place at the RiverPark, the high school graduations, the Eastern Sunday church services, the traveling Broadway shows, the busloads of school children and other activities like "Friday After Five" that would become institutions themselves. Eventually, the plaza on the riverfront would have to be extended so more outdoor activities than we ever imagined could be accommodated.

Rodney ran the center for more than 10 years before he went on to new challenges with the John Hager family and managing their Public Life Foundation. As he left his post at the RiverPark, Rodney turned things at the RiverPark Center over to the capable management of his long-time assistant director, Roxi Witt.

I once told Rodney – after he had encouraged me to consider yet another of his countless ideas for improving Owensboro – that he was the only person I knew who could make me look like a pessimist. In our late 20's, through our 30's and even past the surprise 40th birthday party that some of our friends threw for the two of us (Rodney being a few weeks older than I), we were always running project ideas past each other. I had plenty of ideas; Rodney always had more. We were eager, willing to work and with our relatively youthful optimism, we played off each other's ideas and energy. During an economically dismal recession in Owensboro in the late 80's, Rodney helped energize Owensboro by managing the largest civic project the community had undertaken since recruiting Kentucky Wesleyan in the 1950's, by mobilizing literally thousands of supporters, developing a cultural centerpiece for the community and creating a catalyst for the downtown development that continues to this day.

This period of Rodney's work in the community is all "pre-Public Life Foundation". The accomplishments would all serve as a prelude to the countless contributions he would eventually make to Owensboro-Daviess County in his new role with the Hager family. Our community can never repay the amazing sacrifices Rodney and Joanne made for the benefit of our fellow citizens. And the personal debt that my wife Bonnie, our family and I owe to the two of them can never be fully reciprocated. It can only be treasured.

Dave Adkisson

Rodney is one of those people who gives you the sense "all is well" just having him in the room.

As a new city commissioner coming into office on the cusp of change for our community...Rodney was an invaluable resource for me.

He took time to educate me on where we had been and what resources were available to me during this learning process.

His quiet charm and sense of humor always brought something positive to wherever he was.

Thank you Rodney...enjoy life!!
and God speed.

Cathy Armour

Tallahassee, FL

I met Rodney in the early 80's when he was with Downtown Owensboro Incorporated. He was working with Rev. Walton on setting up neighborhood groups consisting of young urban pioneers. During those early days, we worked together setting up forums, planting dogwood trees, selling lemonade at the BBQ Festival and trying to revive the downtown. It took a very long time, but Rodney held onto the dream and some of us hung on with him to see it begin to happen.

Judy Dixon

Simply a small anecdote about a larger than life man of goodness, talent and leadership.....

Long ago in the early days of PRIDE, a meeting was set up in the back room at the Mexican restaurant on 1st Street/Veterans' Blvd. I don't remember who was supposed to conduct the meeting but, when it came time to convene, Rodney stepped to the rostrum and said: "John has asked me to conduct this meeting." It was a step, in the manner of John Hager, in the selection of Rodney as head of the Public Life Foundation. And off it went along the years, carried off with such character, profoundness and heartfelt insight.

Susie Tyler

He made everyone he talked to feel like he was their friend.

Betsy Roszel

I credit Rodney Berry for the genesis of all the wonderful changes to Down Town and the city of Owensboro. His efforts in all the town meetings he held and distributed question forms to the public, led our public officials to take the actions needed. Rodney Berry had the unheralded energy in which to get our community moving forward. Every time I see Mr. Berry I'm filled with appreciation knowing him. Thank you Rodney.

Most sincerely,
George Skiadas

Just a little tribute to Rodney.

Rodney is such a likable man with a very sweet spirit. I worked for his dear friend, John Hager and also for his loving mother. I saw how he faithfully visited them and showed such great compassion and love. He is so sincere and caring about the needs of others. It is an honor to just know Rodney! Thoughts and prayers.

Teresa Roberts

Dear All,

AmericaSpeaks was privileged to work with Rodney Berry and the entire team at the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro on the initiative "We the People". Rodney Berry was bold when he invited AmericaSpeaks to Owensboro to organize a unique town meeting. The community had experienced many growing pains with divisions between county and city governments, between liberals and conservatives. Rodney wanted his community to work together for the good of all people. In our early meetings we worked on conversations that would unite the voices rather than polarize; that would empower the everyday citizens and inform leaders of their desires.

Appropriately the large meetings in 2007 and 2010 were named "We the People, 21st Century Town Meetings." Tough subjects on education, health care, local government structure, jobs, and clean air were deliberated. The views of the citizens were codified so that leaders could clearly know the will of the people. Intentional followup among leaders and citizens ensured many changes in the community.

It is rare that we at AmericaSpeaks had the privilege of working with one community over several years and to see the results. This accomplishment is because of Rodney Berry's vision and followthrough.

And Owensboro and the counties of Western Kentucky should be extremely proud of the major

results that developed out of the implementation of the community's recommendations and the commitment of leaders and citizens from all sectors to make them a reality.

In 2011 the New York Times reported that more than \$1B had been invested in revitalization projects in Owensboro, including a new hospital, an 8,500-square foot expansion of the regional airport terminal, various road and drainage projects, and a new shopping center along the city's highway bypass (Schneider 2011).

I believe that John Hager would have been extremely proud and pleased to know that his vision of citizen empowerment was the cornerstone without which all of those investments would not have come about.

All of the AmericaSpeaks team add our congratulations and enormous respect to your honoring of Rodney Berry's legacy at the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro.

All the best to the Foundation in its next chapter!

Carolyn J. Lukenmeyer, Ph.D.

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