

BUSINESS PROFILE

Colonial Bank President sees a bright future for Southwest Florida

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Colonial Bank's regional President in Southwest Florida, Harlan C. Parrish said he's read the stories about economic "doom and gloom" in the headlines - but he sees evidence otherwise, on street corners all over town.

"Look at the drug stores," he said. "There's a drug store on every corner now. They see the same thing we do. There are a lot of opportunities (in Southwest Florida) long-term. And that's what we need to focus on right now."

Colonial Bank has \$27 billion in assets nationwide, mostly in the Southern United States, with \$4.4 billion in Southwest Florida. That's up from \$240 million when Parrish took over in 1999, and the hotspot, he said, is Lee County. Since then, it grew from nine Colonial Bank locations to 21. That's why the company put its new 28,000-square-foot regional headquarters on Daniels Parkway, just off Interstate 75.

The facility will be used to educate employees from Naples to Bradenton on all aspects of banking and customer relations, but most importantly: people skills.

"There's just no substitute for being able to interact with people," Parrish said, exuding the same qualities he looks for in employees: bright, verbal and approachable. He also has the endearing characteristic of seeming to very much trust and respect you greatly, as if he knew all along that you were golden. And he feels the same way about the future of Southwest

Florida's economy.

"Although we are feeling some pains now from the overindulgence of a few folks that got real greedy from the speculation and investment standpoint on real estate that ran up values a few years ago - we're gonna be fine," he assured. "I mean, we are continuing to see people move in, albeit at a little slower pace than year's past. We are still having growth."

Baby Boomers will provide the next wave of growth, he said: "You've got 78 million baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964, and a lot of them are gonna move here. You're looking at probably 20 percent of those people are gonna move here over the next 18 to 20 years, so that's gonna create a lot of opportunities for banking or other businesses."

Parrish, 49, is also a baby boomer. But he didn't always want to be a banker. He graduated with honors and bachelors of science in biology from Auburn University in Montgomery, Ala.

"I had aspirations to be a doctor," he said. "I wanted to get into medical school."

But in spite of his top grades, test scores and extracurricular achievements - such as being president of his fraternity - getting in to medical school proved arduous. At the time, Parrish was working at the Montgomery Country Club, managing a small tennis supply store and teaching tennis lessons to kids to pay for school. One of the members happened to be Robert E. Lowder's wife. (He had started Colonial Bank three years earlier at age 39, in 1981, and is still CEO). In fact,

Parrish recalled he used to string her tennis racquet.

She said her husband might be able to help him get into medical school. But instead, Lowder offered him a job at the bank.

"He said, 'If you can get A's in physics and chemistry, and you've got good people skills, I can teach you the banking side of it,'" Parrish said. "Banking's a people business."

That was in 1984, and he's been with the bank ever since - in management and executive vice president positions in Alabama and Tennessee before coming to Fort Myers in 1999.

Although he is focused on his work - even "obsessed" with it - Parrish likes to travel with his family every time he gets the chance. He especially likes to take his 11-year-old daughter, 5-year-old son and wife, Kristi Yvonne Deane to London, a city from his youth.

(Parrish was born in Cambridge, England. His mother was born in London, and he spent summers there with his grandmother when his father was traveling with the U.S. Air Force.)

"What's so incredible is you'll walk down a street and by a building that's 500 years old, it's older than our country," he said. "It's just phenomenal, just a great place."

Parrish also serves on numerous civic and community organizations in both Lee and Collier counties, but he said two stand out: United Way, at which he was the board's chairman for Lee, Hendry and Glades counties two years ago and now



COURTESY PHOTO

Harlan Parrish

plays a supporting role; and the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools.

He quoted Ben Franklin: "An investment in education pays the best interest." And Parrish said he hasn't forgotten a lesson he learned a long time ago: "If at some point in your career you achieve any type of success, send the elevator back down."

That's what Parrish said he plans to do for his children, the trainees at Colonial Bank's new central location, and student's in Lee County Public Schools. ■



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