



# jsb-writer

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## WRITING SAMPLES

### Magazine Articles

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#### "Who Is Robert Parrish?"

By Julie S. Bettinger

His last name is plastered on blue and white signs in select parts of northeast Tallahassee. His fingerprints are left on many of Tallahassee's landmark residential developments, including Maclay Hammock and Golden Eagle, and his namesake company – Parrish Group – retains ownership of 50 percent of the office space in the northeast part of town.

But you won't see Robert Parrish at Chamber of Commerce functions. And he's not listed in the "Who's Who" of old Tallahassee. He's not a graduate of Leon High School, or even Florida State.

Who is this guy? And where did he come from?

We wanted to find out the truth behind this "business mogul," who, despite his holdings, doesn't garner much press.

Chip Hartung, broker-owner and president of Coldwell Banker Hartung & Noblin, Inc., says he recently heard someone suggest that Robert Parrish came from family money. "It's quite the opposite," Hartung says. "He has not been given anything – he's earned his way."

Hartung was a "fledgling" real estate broker in the early 1980s when Robert Parrish came to him and asked for a job in real estate sales.

"What probably influenced me to hire him was he was so committed," Hartung says. "I could just tell he had a high degree of motivation and commitment to be successful."

When Parrish was getting started in the building business, he worked day and night, Hartung says. Living in the same neighborhood, Hartung recalls driving by his house late in the evening and noticing Parrish still at his desk, working.

#### Below radar

A Clydesdale kind of fellow, Robert Parrish's 6 ft. 5 inch frame makes him hard to miss in a crowd.

But you won't see him calling attention to himself – there or anywhere else. Emmitt Reed says that's what surprised him most the first time he met Parrish – his humility.

"I had no clue he was such a big fish in Tallahassee," says Reed, executive vice president of the Florida Home Builders Association. "He just seemed like such a great guy to be around." After Reed spent more time in Tallahassee and caught a glimpse of Parrish's real estate holdings, he could hardly believe it was the same guy. "He's kind, he's polite, he's got a gentle spirit," Reed says, "and yet, he's a business mogul."

The son of an air force sergeant, Robert Parrish spent his earliest years in Europe. When he was in the fourth grade, his dad retired and the family moved to Augusta, Georgia, where his father's relatives lived.

Parrish remembers being a very independent child – and adventurous. He recalls playing board games and other competitive pursuits until all hours of the night in junior high and participating in competitive sports like track and baseball in high school.

Parrish says he fell in love with the city of Tallahassee when he traveled here during high school, on his way to Panama City Beach for spring break. In fact, he recalls one time never making it to the beach, as he persuaded his friends to drop him by the capital city and pick him up on the way back.

"I stayed in Sally Hall for \$2 a night and just spent time on FSU's campus," he says. Finally at age 19, Parrish moved to Tallahassee for good. He worked his way through Tallahassee Community College, and received his AA degree. While he was pursuing a bachelor's at Florida State University, his younger sister died and he says he went through a dark time in his life.

He decided to take some time off from school and started working full time as a bartender and later managing bars. There he met a lot of the same people he considers close friends today.

## **Starts at home**

Parrish hung up his bartender's towel in 1978 and sold real estate for Hartung's firm, then hooked up with builder George Parker and started learning about what would become his lifelong trade.

He pursued his building contractor's license and, at age 28, he built his first high-end spec home on Noble Drive. Parrish was so successful he built 14 more homes in the same neighborhood, before becoming one of the early builders in Golden Eagle. From there, he built in SummerBrooke and Hawk's Nest.

Residential was Parrish's niche and he says he turned down opportunities to move into commercial building. That is, until developer Fred Shelfer convinced him to build the SummerBrooke Country Club.

"After that, I couldn't say 'no' to the people wanting me to do commercial buildings," Parrish says.

## **A charitable foundation**

Building homes and commercial offices, though, are only part of the story of Robert Parrish's life, according to those who know him.

"He's really the most generous person I know," says Mike Zoda, a marriage and family therapist, and facilitator of Parrish's bible study group. "That struck me even in the first five years I knew

him" – Parrish's bartending days. "He was really generous with his friends.

"I think, spiritually, that's why he's blessed," Zoda continues. "I think he has a gift of giving and God equips him in that gift. I think he feels a very great burden of responsibility to use that gift in a way that's honoring God. It's good stewardship."

It was Parrish's charitable heart that caught Jackie Wilson's attention, too. The CEO of the Tallahassee Builders Association says she first got to know Parrish when he came up with the idea to build a house in 24 hours and sell it to raise funds to benefit the Habitat for Humanity.

Parrish ran the job and the project was a huge success. "Robert took no profit on it whatsoever," Wilson says, "and we've built two more homes since."

Recognizing Parrish's enthusiasm and industry knowledge, Wilson says she encouraged him to join the Board of Directors for TBA. "At first, he resisted," she says. "Then he saw it was something he should do as a way to pay back the industry."

TBA has continued to benefit from Parrish's business acumen, too, she says. It was his initiative that helped the association acquire land and build new headquarters, complete with a banquet facility. "He headed it up, chaired the committee, acquired the land, permitted the building and took no profit because it was something he wanted to do for the association," she says.

Parrish has done similar projects for the Florida Home Builders, including working with its foundation. "He had the foresight to purchase a large tract of land we're planning to use for a training camp for the Future Builders of America," says Emmitt Reed. It encompasses 500 acres on the south side of Tallahassee.

"Robert could have purchased that land for himself – it's gorgeous land with a lake and was priced incredibly low," Reed says. "Before we closed, it had almost doubled in value."

But you won't see a press release alluding to Parrish's contribution to this or any other not-for-profit venture. In fact, when asked for a biography recently by a national firm and potential client, Parrish said he didn't think he had one.

"He's a private person and he's not out for everybody to know his business – he's not out for the limelight," Wilson says. "He does this stuff sincerely from his heart and not so everybody knows he did it."

Responding to references of his charitable projects, Parrish says the root is probably from his own experience of having been there. "I remember the early 1970s, when I couldn't get a job," he says, "and many times when I was so broke. I can remember times in my life when I was 30 minutes away from not making it."

### **Leading to the state**

Because of Parrish's leadership abilities, Jackie Wilson encouraged him to pursue office in the 19,000-member Florida Home Builder's Association – a group known to have the ear of Florida politicians, congress and even the President of the United States, at times.

A newcomer to the association's politics, Parrish managed to run a campaign that won him the position of secretary in a contested race – a first in the group's history.

"He basically won people over," Wilson says. Parrish traveled to 23 cities speaking to builder

groups. "I think that people were won over by his business background, his knowledge of the industry, of the issues and his down to earth approach to the solutions," she says.

The position of secretary is actually a five year commitment that will make Parrish president of FHBA in 2008 – a sizeable position for a person who likes to fly comfortably below radar.

Still, Parrish says, "None of this is part of the plan. It hasn't been a big goal of mine."

Describing himself, Parrish says he tends to be an idea person. He's "like a sponge," soaking up ideas from the 15 business journals he reads weekly. He says he also likes to travel to bring fresh ideas to Tallahassee.

He admits to one downfall, though. Because he's so high strung, he sometimes comes across impatient. But that's usually because he's juggling multiple projects – sometimes 20 major ones at a time. "I'm not a single task kind of person," he says. And that makes it difficult for those around him to keep pace.

Divorced with no children, the 50-year old Parrish is very close with his family, including his mother and other sister. His father is now deceased.

Despite the hefty work load Parrish seems to carry, he isn't an "all work and no play" kind of guy. He's serious about his down time. "When I go to North Carolina for a week, I may not even call the office," he says. He just immerses himself in riding his Harley-Davidson Road King, golfing and hiking. "My brain generally stops on the ideas," he says. That is, until he's back in his SUV headed home. "In the six-and-a-half hour drive, I probably fill 50 pages of the note pad."

Since he's one of the area's largest private developers, some people doubt Parrish's sincerity about wanting the best for Tallahassee's future. But he says, "I love the people of Tallahassee. And in spite of some of our disagreements – the development world versus the non developers – I'm still convinced at the end of the day we have the most beautiful city our size in America."

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