

# Faces of DCRP

## Alumni Look Back on Their Education and Their Careers

*Professional planning has changed dramatically over the last 60 years. The following pages include profiles of planning professionals who graduated from the Department of City and Regional Planning and have pursued planning-related careers in the public and private sectors. These profiles represent men and women of diverse backgrounds engaged in varying professional activities.*



**N. Jerry Simonoff**  
**MRP '70**

*Director of Technology Applications, Architecture & Strategy Virginia Information Technologies Agency*

**M**y 36-year career since graduating from DCRP has certainly taken a number of interesting twists and turns. And while my current position—in essence, leading information technology planning for the Commonwealth of Virginia—may seem somewhat distant from my early interests in water quality management while pursuing my MRP, I continue to see the value gained from my two years in Chapel Hill.

After receiving my MRP, I joined the regional planning commission for the Richmond, Virginia metropolitan area. When in 1975 the Environmental Protection

Agency offered a \$1 million Section 208 water quality grant to my agency and the adjoining regional unit to the south, I jumped at the opportunity to head up the two-year effort. Two very different projects—redesigning the streetscape for West Franklin Street and creating an economically-viable planned community—still stand out in my mind as real-world lessons in problem-solving and team building.

That Section 208 study was unique in two aspects that influenced my future career. To alleviate the fears of local political leaders that they would be burdened with a lingering bureaucracy after the grant ended, we contracted out the entire effort to a combination of six different firms. To provide advanced modeling capabilities to meet the intent of the study, we built the first geographic information system of its kind in the state. That experience kindled in me both a continuing fascination with technology applications and an interest in the diversity that consulting offered.

In 1992, I joined the state's new technology planning agency, eventually becoming its director. The advancement of IT in the Commonwealth has indeed been exciting and professionally fulfilling. Through a succession of four governors (Virginia is the only state where the chief executive is still limited to one term), we have continued to introduce improved IT management and industry best practices. In 2005, *Governing* magazine named Virginia the nation's "Best Managed State." Our progress in IT was a significant contributor to that award.

Among many advances was the 2003 creation of the Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) as the state's central IT utility. VITA consolidates all of the state's central IT functions, including planning, as well as assuming ownership of the diverse IT infrastructure of all executive branch agencies—from desktops to servers, networks, and data centers. Through an innovative public-private partnership with Northrop Grumman, over the next three years we will completely modernize that infrastructure, creating a cohesive 21st century platform for use by state agencies as well as local governments.

Within the VITA organization, my unit's diverse assignments include statewide strategic IT planning, statewide IT policies and standards, exploration of new technologies, and development of new enterprise (statewide or multi-agency) business applications. Those responsibilities require considering a wide diversity of factors and interests, facilitating collaboration among multiple stakeholder groups, and keeping up with the ever-changing technology landscape—all the while keeping the public interest foremost in mind. Thirty-six years ago, there is no way I could have envisioned this as my career. However, the underlying analytic, problem-solving, and collaboration skills I gained at DCRP are just as valid for what I do today as they were for a budding water quality management specialist back then.



**Nancy L. Grden**

**MRP '75**

*Chief Marketing Officer and  
EVP, Specialty Products Group,  
AMERIGROUP Corporation*

I fully intended to seek a public sector career as a program administrator, policy developer, or politician when I received my Masters in Regional Planning (MRP) from the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill. After five years in the public sector, I received an MBA and took a private sector job primarily to get experience before returning to public sector work. However, my career remained with the private sector and in multiple industries—first banking, then behavioral health, Internet start-ups, and now health care.

I can say with no hesitation that an MRP has served me well in the business world, for the following reasons:

- 1) It provided a world view and appreciation for interdependencies. Planning is synonymous with strategy, the big picture, and the seen and unseen interconnections of events and decisions. The skills I learned at DCRP to anticipate and address these interdependencies are even more critical in today's business environment than ever before.
- 2) It taught me the planning process structure. As DCRP students, our goal was to avoid seeing plans on a shelf, gathering dust. In the corporate settings I have experienced, this has luckily not been a problem. I have had the privilege of heading planning and development for companies that use a planning process to build a vision for the future, and reward its employees when the desired results from the plan are achieved.
- 3) I gained vision and tools to establish public-private partnerships. I am thankful to DCRP faculty and fel-

low students for fostering the expectation, even in 1975, that public-private partnerships should be created and can operate effectively. My current employer, AMERIGROUP, uses this business model when we partner with state governments to solve Medicaid budget challenges, in an effort to improve the health outcomes for their citizens.

As DCRP celebrates a 60-year milestone and looks ahead, I applaud the actions to evolve the curriculum and broaden recruitment of faculty and students, yet preserve the core planning foundation essential to an MRP.



**Jeff Swain**

**MRP '68**

*Management Consultant and Community Volunteer*

I've enjoyed a most varied, rewarding, and, yes, sometimes turbulent and chaotic public service career in New York State. Twenty-four years were spent in Rochester in a number of planning and senior management positions—interrupted by a stab at electoral

## Carolina Planning - Still Going!

by *Nancy Grden*

Twice a year, when I receive *Carolina Planning* in my mailbox, I am reminded of how it all began. The idea for a student-run planning journal was hatched in the summer of 1974, when a small group of second-year DCRP students, including myself, decided to put together an ongoing publication for students to manage, edit, and write planning content at a national level. We knew we needed two things to launch *Carolina Planning*: a vision for its purpose and future, and dedicated resources.

### Setting a Vision

The vision we established for *Carolina Planning* was:

- To provide a forum for the discussion of planning problems, issues, and techniques related to the practice of planning in North Carolina.
- To enhance public officials' awareness about planning in North Carolina and elsewhere.
- To improve the exchange of planning information between the DCRP and other government and academic institutions in the state and nation

### Dedicated Resources

Our first issue was published in the spring of 1975. *Carolina Planning* could not have been published without the invaluable assistance of the first and long-time faculty advisor, David Godschalk. Additionally, the John A Parker Trust Fund and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation provided the necessary financial groundwork for launching and sustaining what is now a thirty-year-plus institution.

### Thirty-One Years Later

The current editors of *Carolina Planning* have built on the strong foundation laid by previous editors. The primary mission still lies in serving as a resource to planning professionals, academics, students, and alumni in North Carolina. To achieve this end, *Carolina Planning* provides relevant research and commentary from practitioners, professors, and others related to the planning field. Alongside its historic commitment to North Carolina, *Carolina Planning* serves subscribers in the Southeast region, across the nation, and in five foreign countries. *Carolina Planning* continues to thrive through the hard work of its dedicated staff, made possible due to support and funding from the NCAPA, the John Parker Trust Fund, and the UNC DCRP.

politics—and ten years were spent in state government in Albany in policy, planning, and senior management positions. The central lesson learned over these years is that good government, planning, and politics are inextricably linked and that a healthy exchange between planning and politics is necessary.

My first job in Rochester was as city planner, a natural segue from DCRP. This was quickly followed by five years with the Rochester Model Cities Program, which for the time in 1968 was the most ambitious nationally funded effort to reverse the debilitating effects of prejudice, and studied neglect in urban communities. Following Model Cities was a varied public service career in local and state government. My responsibilities were equally divided between planning and management activities: assistant to the city manager, municipal department head, deputy director for a state transportation agency, and deputy state comptroller. Through these experiences, I learned to work with a citizenry long deprived of access to its local government and its fair share of city services. I learned that real plan-making had consequences and that to implement plans you needed access to or control of funding. Also, I learned to treat all people fairly, equitably, and with consistency.

My two years at DCRP provided not only the impetus for my first choice of employment but also the foundation for many of my eventual career choices. Over my 40 year career, on many occasions I harkened back to my DCRP days: the course work in public investment theory, discussions about the difficulties of doing cost/benefit analyses, and our field trip with Maynard Hufschmidt to the Tennessee Valley Authority. My minor in public administration provided case study examples in administration, organizational behavior, and inter-governmental relationships which revisited me over the years.

I would be remiss if I did not give testimony to the vision and leadership of DCRP's founder, Jack Parker.

He looked out for all of the DCRP alums and stayed in touch, helping to bind us to the Carolina experience. He also insured that, as Stuart Chapin wrote, the Department was “alert to change in the field” and has “kept the curriculum abreast of the requisite knowledge and skills necessary for students to qualify” in the job market.”

Now enjoying a state of semi-retirement, I carry a business card identifying me as a “management consultant and community volunteer.” When I left Carolina, I would not have guessed I'd consider myself a “planner for life.” Taken together, the theory and practice of planning and the primacy of the equity principle wrapped around the activities, judgments and values embodied in my work, pretty much describes my career in public service and how it was shaped by DCRP.



**Leigh Anne  
McDonald**  
**MRP '05**

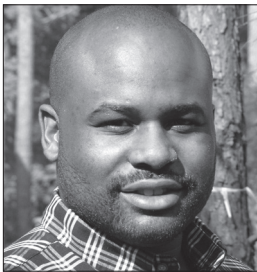
*Associate, Clarion Associates*

After gaining several years of planning experience working with local governments on a broad range of initiatives, I began work as an associate planner in Clarion's Chapel Hill office. While at Clarion Associates, I have worked on comprehensive and growth management plans, neighborhood plans, affordable housing assessments and solutions, impact fee analysis, and ordinances, zoning ordinances, and design standards. Prior to coming to Clarion Associates, I worked at The Conservation Fund where I linked my management training and my interests in green infrastructure planning to manage a grant program for open space preservation and raise funding for and coordinate multiple conservation demonstration projects. I also worked on

a multidisciplinary team that prepared a community vision plan for a rural town in Maryland.

My two years spent at the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) were invaluable. Working under several of our field's great scholars provided me with an excellent background for entering the field of land use planning. My research and writing skills and my ability to work successfully in a group setting improved significantly during my time at New East.

DCRP provided me with not only the substantive basis to enter the field of planning consulting, but also the experience of juggling multiple classes, my research assistantship, and extra-curricular activities. Time management and work efficiency were two skills that I honed while at DCRP. These skills have proven critical to my career. Working in the private sector requires that you work in the most efficient manner while always trying to deliver the highest quality product within budget. The educational training I received at DCRP is largely responsible for my career success.



**John Cooper, Jr. Ph.D. '04**

*Coordinator of the Emergency Preparedness Demonstration, MDC*

I graduated from Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, in 1992 with a B.S. degree in economics and received the Master of Urban Planning degree from Texas A&M in 1994. I came to Chapel Hill in 1995 to begin work on a Ph.D. under the guidance of Phil Berke, but I took time off from 1997 until 2000 to join the North Carolina Division of Emergency Management (NCDEM). At the NCDEM, I worked on the response and recovery efforts for hurricanes Fran and Floyd. After Floyd, I was appointed by the Director of

the NCDEM as an advisor to President Clinton's Committee for the Redevelopment of the historically black town of Princeville, NC.

I returned to the DCRP in 2000 as a National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Fellow, to study the implications of land use decisions on the extent to which disadvantaged groups are impacted by natural and technological disasters, and ways to better account for issues of disadvantaged groups in disaster mitigation and preparedness. I received my Ph.D. in the fall of 2004.

Since coming to North Carolina, I have had a number of experiences in working with local governments, nonprofits, and grassroots groups to create sustainable community development programs. I have served on the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation Advisory Panel and the boards of the statewide North Carolina Smart Growth Alliance and the Orange Community Housing Land Trust. I volunteered for the NC Environmental Justice Network and was one of the first graduates of the NC Community Builders Learning Project hosted by the Community Solutions Network.

Just prior to finishing my Ph.D., I joined the staff of MDC, a nonprofit with a mission to advance the South through strategies that expand opportunity, reduce poverty, and build inclusive communities. At MDC, I am currently the Coordinator of the Emergency Preparedness Demonstration (EPD), a FEMA-supported effort intended to understand the barriers to disaster awareness and preparedness in disadvantaged communities. MDC manages this initiative, in partnership with the Center for Urban and Regional Studies (CURS).

It became clear to me early in my time as a student at DCRP that a persistent consequence of planning decisions is that disadvantaged groups share a disproportionate burden of the negative impacts. As a volunteer with environmental justice groups, I learned how disadvantaged people could be motivated to participate

and stave off the negatives if they were more informed about the cost of not participating. It became clear to me then that the choices planners make with regard to engaging and informing citizens are keys to ensuring that disadvantaged groups have a voice in the planning process. With this knowledge, I have focused on understanding how planners can become better citizen involvement technicians. During my time at the DCRP, I was surrounded by advisors who shaped my perspective. The counsel I got from faculty members such as Ray Burby, Ed Kaiser, Dave Moreau, and Phil Berke especially, helped me to grow not only in intellect but also in integrity. Also, I'll never forget the way many of the DCRP staff and students propped up my spirit during the trying times; I could not have made it without them.