

## CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSION: A. L. BURRUSS, JULY 3, 1927–MAY 10, 1986

Boys, it's a great life.

—Al Burruss to Roy Barnes and friends

These are the words that Al Burruss spoke to former Governor Roy Barnes and other friends visiting him in the hospital after he had learned he had advanced pancreatic cancer. And these words pretty well sum up how Burruss felt about life—it was enjoyable, it was fun, and it was joyful. And this was not because he was a wealthy man, though that was a part of it, but he had enjoyed more than one kind of wealth in his life. Spending money when you have it can be fun, but that wasn't Burruss's idea of having fun with money. His idea was to give it away, to give away as much of it as he could, as fast as he could. Burruss's quality of giving was what Rev. Charles Sineath chose to focus on when he gave his eulogy at Burruss's funeral. As Rev. Sineath explained, Burruss gave money away because he believed God had given it to him and therefore it was his duty to share the wealth—not for his own personal glory but for the glory of God. According to Rev. Sineath, "He'd say, 'Whenever there's a special need, let me know,' and I did. I'd drop him a note, and he'd call up and ask how much was needed. He loved to give. Some people would give, but they didn't love it. He'd thank me for calling."<sup>1</sup> As many people said after his death, most of Burruss's giving had been done anonymously. He gave to people at his church with special

needs and to the children of friends in trouble—a teenager who wrecked her car and needed money to repair it and the son of a friend who needed money to meet his mortgage or face foreclosure. He shared his wealth with people he worked with at the state House or who worked for him at Tip Top Poultry Inc. and to fellow politicians who needed help with campaign debts—US Representative Buddy Darden said Burruss helped him after his loss in 1976. He supported local organizations and Little League teams and an orphanage—the Calvary Home for Children. Burruss’s generosity spread to countless homeless people—a man pushing a grocery cart while collecting cans alongside the road to sell—and to those with whom he came in contact with casually—a waitress with a limp for whom he left a \$200 tip. When his friends recall his generosity, however, money is only one of the things they speak about.

Another thing Burruss had shared was his time. His wife Bobbi says he always had time for anyone who came to him for help or advice or just to talk. No one was ever turned away. If a constituent came to him with a problem, Burruss felt it his duty to help get that problem fixed if he could. His colleagues in the Georgia General Assembly say the same thing. If ever a legislator needed help, Burruss was there to discuss the legislation, answer questions, or even ask tough questions to direct the legislator in the right direction. He seemed to have boundless time and energy—one legislator said Burruss would work twenty-six hours a day if that’s what it took. His wife was fond of saying, where other people had seven days a week, Al seemed to have eight. Acknowledging the enormous amount of time Al devoted to helping others, four of his fellow legislators in the House wrote to the political writer Frederick Allen to say, “Al spends a giant portion of his time helping anyone who seeks his counsel.”<sup>2</sup> And he did all this while suffering intense arthritic pain—the kind of pain that prostrated him, causing him to lie down on the floor during committee meetings. Even when his as-yet-undetected cancer was giving him additional pain during the last session of his career, he worked eighteen-hour days, then took work home.

Fixing problems and straightening out legislators seemed second nature to him. He had, as his colleagues and friends claim, prodigious knowledge that he put to use for the people of Cobb and Paulding Counties and for the people of Georgia in general. He was known as “Mr. Budget” because

he knew not only how the budget worked, but how to make it work when no one else knew quite what to do. House Speaker Tom Murphy called Burruss “one of the most intelligent, hardest working individuals I ever served with.... You could say that Al Burruss, as much as anybody, was responsible for the state of Georgia’s fiscal soundness.”<sup>3</sup> And Cobb County, his colleagues claim, reaped millions of dollars for its colleges—Kennesaw State University (formerly Kennesaw State College) and Southern Polytechnic State University (formerly Southern Technical Institute)—as well as funds for numerous local projects that Burruss personally lobbied for every year, including such things as mental retardation service programs in Cobb.<sup>4</sup> He knew the official legislative rules almost by heart and always carried the Rules book wherever he went in the House. He was considered the expert on state taxation—Roy Barnes said no one knew taxation like Al did.

Looking back at Burruss’s life from the vantage point of more than twenty years, we see an extraordinary man. One who grew up during the hard times of the Depression and who embraced hard work in order to help support his family of nine siblings while getting his own high school education. No work was beneath him—he worked at whatever jobs were available and gave them his all. Like many another American teens during World War II, he eagerly joined the Navy, which rewarded him with the kind of training that would make life different for him and his family stateside. Burruss took the opportunities that he himself eagerly sought and made the most of them. That he was also blessed with loving friends and family and was a friendly, likeable man, helped bring him opportunities that not everyone gets or can take advantage of in the ways he did.

The things that mattered most to him—such as helping out others, be they family, friends, or strangers—were part of the driving force that fueled his ambition. But he wanted to do more than become a wealthy man—though his business acumen led to that. He wanted to be where the action was, to make it possible for people to have and lead better lives. Though he could and did give away a lot of his personal monetary wealth to the less fortunate, Burruss was more interested in giving back to others through positive action. And he never could stay still; it was as if he knew he would not have a long life in which to get all the things done that mattered to him, so he worked in overdrive. His desire to improve the conditions of others

and make government responsible to the people led him into the Cobb County Commission and then into the state legislature. He learned early on that power was necessary to effect his plans of making life better for the people of Georgia.

Unlike the old-boy network he ultimately worked his way into, Burruss refused to wait for his time to come, but instead made things happen in his own time. A perfect example is when he wanted to become Speaker pro tempore and so he drove around the state garnering support, something no one had done before. When he challenged Murphy to the powerful Speaker post, he was driven by his own belief that government could be done better and that he could be the one to make changes. Even in the face of his defeat, he did not give up but fought to get back in the good graces of the powerful House network. That he did so is testament to his extraordinary work ethic and ability to make friends and keep them.

Whenever anyone talks about Burruss, even in the decades since his death in 1986, they never fail to bring up his loss to Murphy and express admiration for his extraordinary comeback in politics. It took more than hard work for Burruss to reinstate himself in the good graces of Murphy and others; the key to his comeback lay in his own personality. Burruss was genuine in his friendships and generous to his colleagues, someone to go to for sound advice and help with any problem, be it legislative or not. His integrity and honesty drew people to him and assured them that he could be trusted. Surprisingly, he was well-liked in spite of his propensity to say what he felt about any issue. As numerous people attest, Burruss always told people what he thought, what the facts were as he understood them, regardless of how people would take such information. He was honest, as some might say, to a fault. Bill Kinney, associate editor of *The Marietta Daily Journal*, wrote this when Burruss was in the house:

His integrity was beyond question. Newsmen will tell you Al leveled with them. He felt comfortable and tuned-in with anyone, ranging from a laborer to former President Jimmy Carter. Though a millionaire, he never forgot his humble upbringing in the Georgia mountains.<sup>5</sup>

Though he always listened to others, he kept his own counsel and voted his own conscience. As his friends in the legislature point out, he could be stubborn—once he made up his mind there was no changing it. Yet, he was a man of contradictory traits—known for being tough yet gentle at the same time, as Lieutenant Governor Zell Miller characterized him.<sup>6</sup> Tough, because he was determined to get legislation passed that he believed in. Gentle, because he understood people and knew what it was like to be on the losing side. As all who knew him are quick to say of him, Al Burruss was a compassionate man. He was also a loving man, especially when it came to his family.

Early morning was the time he spent with his children, cooking their breakfast and catching up on their lives. He rarely missed a practice of his son's or daughter's while they were growing up and participating in the usual sports and other activities of middle class families. There was always time to take his wife and children on vacations, including flying his son and his high school friends to the Caribbean for diving trips or flying his family to their summer home in South Carolina. He enjoyed a game of golf when time permitted. He did all the things that people do in the course of their lives. If his life seemed richer, it was because he never sat still, waiting for life to happen—he made things happen. He grew a successful business; he joined organizations that furthered his professional aims; he got to know people from all walks of life and many of those people helped him achieve his goals, but they did so because they saw he was a good man, a man to trust. He did not serve others for personal acclaim and because he wanted to praise God, to give back because he felt that God had so blessed him, he in turn gave the same to the people he met, worked with, played with, and loved.

In his eulogy at Burruss's funeral, Rev. Sineath quoted the following passage from the book of Mark (Mark 10: 43–45), in which Jesus is addressing the disciples:

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.<sup>7</sup>

Bill Kinney, describing the funeral in *The Marietta Daily Journal*, thought this passage from Mark aptly typified Burruss's life. Burruss saw himself as a servant of God first, and a servant of men second. When he lay dying, Burruss told his family and friends that he wanted, "a service of thanksgiving to the glory of God, not to Al Burruss."<sup>8</sup> To this end, there were twenty-nine wreaths of brightly colored flowers decorating the church's pulpit<sup>9</sup> at his funeral, and his family members dressed accordingly, in what his daughter Renée Burruss Davis described as "bright, triumph colors dedicated to the glory of God," rather than traditional dark colors.<sup>10</sup> According to Rev. Sineath, Burruss kept a message taped inside his briefcase: "God is greater than any problem I have."<sup>11</sup> Al Burruss put his faith into practice and for that reason, his political record and personal success need to be seen alongside that faith.

The 1986 legislative session ended on March 8; Burruss gathered up his paperwork and left the Capitol to return home in preparation for surgery to discover the source of his stomach pain. Two days later, he underwent exploratory surgery at Kennestone Hospital in Marietta, during which surgeons determined he had advanced pancreatic cancer. Doctors told him he had about sixty days to live; he died on May 10, 1986 at 7:00 a.m., with his wife Bobbi at his side. In the short time between March and May of that year, Burruss worked to get his estate in order and arrange for his son to take over as president of Tip Top Poultry, where Robin had been working since 1973. During this time, Marietta city officials named a forty-six-acre park, then being constructed at the corner of Cobb Parkway and South Cobb Drive, for Burruss, who had been instrumental in helping the city get funds to build the park; they named the park the A. L. Burruss Nature Park.<sup>12</sup> Today the park is a lovely natural wooded area with trails.

Before he became ill, Burruss had been scheduled to speak at the First United Methodist Church of Marietta's annual Lenten Lunch Lift in March. When he realized he would not be able to attend and speak, he recorded a message from his hospital bed that was played to the large crowd who attended the service, including some family members—his mother Eula Burruss, brother Gerald Burruss, sister Betty Brown, daughter Renée Burruss Davis, and son Robin Burruss. His wife Bobbi remained at the

hospital. His message is primarily a testament of his faith (see Appendix A for the complete transcript of this recording), yet he makes it clear that death holds no fear for him.

Since the news has come that I have pancreatic cancer that is most probably terminal, I've been strangely calm and sustained. I give all the credit for this to the fact that my faith was there stronger than even I believed it to be. I am not panicked.<sup>13</sup>

Barnes remembers this aspect of Burruss, “There’s many people that teach us how to live. But Al Burruss taught me and others how to die. He was one of the most courageous fellows I have ever met in death.”<sup>14</sup>

Burruss did get to go home for a short while and *The Marietta Daily Journal* reported that “He was glimpsed doing two of his favorite activities—cleaning his pool and soaking up some sunshine in a lounge chair on an 80-degree day.”<sup>15</sup> Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter also visited him in his Marietta home one day. There weren’t too many good days like these, and he had to return to the hospital. While in the hospital, however, the man who called himself a “simple chicken plucker” had many visitors<sup>16</sup>—national, state, and local officials, and many friends. According to his nurse, he was resting comfortably when he died.

As might be expected of such a well-loved and well-respected man, his funeral was quite large—over one thousand five hundred people attended the service at First United Methodist Church of Marietta. His two pastors, Rev. Hugh Cauthen of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church in East Cobb and Rev. Charles Sineath of First United Methodist Church of Marietta, led the service. Speaker Tom Murphy and many other state legislators sat in the choir loft and formed an honor guard for Burruss’s casket as it was placed in the hearse for his burial at Kennesaw Memorial Park Cemetery. During the service, a simple beige cloth covered the casket, but this was replaced with an American flag before being placed in the hearse. Former President Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter attended the funeral, as did Governor Harris, Lieutenant Governor Zell Miller, and US Representative Buddy Darden, among many others. Besides some one hundred fifty members of his family and friends in attendance, including

Chet Austin and his wife Hazel, Judge Hines and his wife Helen, six long-time employees attended, including his gardener, Howard Zachary.<sup>17</sup>

During his lifetime, Burruss had received many honors due to his civic and political activities. These honors continued after his death. Named in his honor, the Burruss Correctional Training Center, in Forsyth, Georgia was dedicated on Tuesday, January 20, 1987. The dedication letter reads,

The Burruss Correctional Training Center, a 300-man medium security institution, will serve as the labor component of the new Georgia Public Training Center and will house a Special Alternative Incarceration Unit. This highly regimented program for younger offenders has gained national attention during the past 2 years.<sup>18</sup>

In 1987, plans to create an institute of public service at Kennesaw State College to honor Burruss were announced.<sup>19</sup> According to Richard Hardin, a consultant for the institute,

its purposes would be “to provide people who are interested in government and political activity with a forum and a training ground, and to serve as an information center for people who need some kind of government assistance but don’t know how to get things done in government; the institute will try to help people the way he did.”<sup>20</sup>

The A. L. Burruss Institute of Public Service & Research, was officially created by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, in July of 1988. The institutes website indicates that,

To achieve the University President’s goal of “commitment to community,” the Institute embarked on an ambitious plan to reach city, county, regional, state, and federal agencies and elected officials, as well as non-profit and community service organizations, by providing technical assistance and applied research services in a diversity of areas ranging from gerontology to lake management studies within North Atlanta and Northwest Georgia.<sup>21</sup>

Kennesaw State University President Emeritus Betty L. Siegel, in recalling her friend Al Burruss, thought the institute would be an ideal way to honor his memory.

My favorite story of Al personally was when he came to my house and sat and talked with a number of students. And as he talked to the students they were all gathered around him as he sat in a chair and he was talking about what brought him into public service. He felt that God had been good to him and that he had to give something back to the community in exchange for all the blessings he had had. Al would have liked the [A. L. Burruss Institute], a continuation of what he really believed in, what he wanted to do with his life. It's a living testimony to the kinds of things that can be done in teaching, in service, and in applied research. It manifests his spirit in the best sense of the word.<sup>22</sup>

In 1988 The Marietta City School District dedicated an elementary school in his honor—the A. L. Burruss Elementary School. In 1991, the one hundred thousand-square-foot A. L. Burruss Building opened; it houses the Kennesaw State University Coles College of Business. The building was named for Burruss because he was instrumental in securing funding for it in the state budget.

The legacy of A. L. Burruss lives on in the institute that bears his name, and in the other places named in his honor. The heart of the man, however, lives on in the memories still held by his friends and family. This book cannot tell the whole story of who Al Burruss was—no book could do that—but it serves to remind people that here was a great man, a man who loved his state and its people, loved his family and friends, and loved his God. He still serves as an exemplar of what public service is all about and how best to do it. According to Joe Mack Wilson, Al's friend Otis Brumby, publisher of *The Marietta Daily Journal*, was fond of saying, "Al is in politics for all the right reasons."<sup>23</sup> A. L. Burruss was, in every instance, be it politics, church, or relationships, living life to the fullest and passionately committed for all the right reasons. His life is a lesson

to us all. Roy Barnes remembers what Burruss told him one day when he visited his friend in the hospital:

He said, ‘Don’t worry about me, I’ve had a great life.’ And until the day he died he was as happy as I’ve ever seen him. I went to see him in the hospital when he was lingering, right at the end. I sat in there with him and he was going in and out of consciousness. And he became conscious and he said, ‘Boys, it’s a great life.’ And those were the last words I ever heard him speak.<sup>24</sup>

What Burruss is remembered for is not his wealth, but his love for others, his compassion, his generosity, but most of all, as a man whose life was dedicated to public service—to making life better for all Georgians.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER 5

1. See Hank Ezell, "Friends Remember 'Quiet Giver': Burruss Praised for Endless Energy, Compassion and Attention to Detail," *AJC* 11 May 1986, p. 9A.
2. See Tom Bennett, "Al Burruss, Majority Leader of State House, Dies at 58," *AJC* 11 May 1986, 1A.
3. *ibid.*
4. See Merritt Cowart, "Carters Among Those Who Mourn Burruss," *MDJ* 12 May 1986, p. 1.
5. Cowart, "Friends Mourn Burruss," p. 8A.
6. See Salynn Boyles, "Burruss Called 'Giving, Wise' Friend, Leader," *MDJ* 13 May 1986, p. 1.
7. See Bill Kinney, "In Limousines and Pickups, They Came to Honor Burruss," *MDJ* 13 May 1986, p. 1.
8. *ibid.*
9. See Kevin Sack, "Over 1,500 Attend Burruss' Funeral: House Majority Leader is Eulogized as 'Something Special,'" *AJC* 13 May 1986, p. 11A.
10. Kinney, p. 1.
11. Sack, p. 11A.
12. See Salynn Boyles, "Park Is Named for Al Burruss," *MDJ* 19 March 1986, p. 6A.
13. A. L. Burruss, Lenten Lunch Lift, audiotape of speech, 26 March 1986, Marietta, GA. See Appendix A for the complete transcript.
14. Barnes, interview.
15. *MDJ* 5 April 1986, n.p. Burruss Scrapbook 1985–1986. The A. L. Burruss Institute for Public Service & Research, Kennesaw State University.
16. By Tom Bennett's account ("Al Burruss, Majority Leader of State House, Dies at 58"), there were thousands of visitors; a later news report (Ross Bidle, "Burruss Cites Power of Faith in Taped Message to Group," *MDJ* 27 March 1986, p. 1A.) put it at hundreds.
17. Kinney, p. 1.
18. Letter from David C. Evans, commissioner, Georgia Department of Corrections, to Mrs. Chesley [*sic*] Burruss and Mr. Gerald Burruss. A. L. Burruss 1985–1986 Scrapbook. The A. L. Burruss Institute for Public Service & Research, Kennesaw State University.
19. "Burruss Public Service Institute Planned." Monday Report. A Kennesaw College Publication for Faculty and Staff. Feb. 9, 1987, p. 1. A. L. Burruss 1985–1986 Scrapbook. The A. L. Burruss Institute for Public Service & Research, Kennesaw State University.
20. *ibid.*
21. *A. L. Burruss Institute of Public Service & Research*, retrieved August 4, 2007, [http://www.kennesaw.edu/burruss\\_inst/about/](http://www.kennesaw.edu/burruss_inst/about/).
22. *A. L. Burruss: A Remembrance*, prod. Peter Kolstad and Rick Westaway, 45 min., Georgia Public Television and Kennesaw State College, GPB-TV, Atlanta, 1992, videocassette.
23. See Merritt Cowart, "Friends Mourn Burruss Loss," *MDJ* 11 May 1986, p. 8A.