

A Conversation With Phi Kappa Sigma's Alumnus of the Year for 2009

The Honorable Robert R. "Bob" Riley, Alpha Kappa (Alabama) 1965, Governor of the Great State of Alabama

By, Director of Development Christopher M. Hanes, Beta Mu (South Alabama) 2001

About Governor Riley

Prior to his election as Alabama's 52nd Governor in January 2003, Governor Riley served for three terms in Congress from 1996-2002 representing Alabama's third district. Before entering public service, Governor Riley ran a number of successful businesses, including a trucking company, a car dealership, a real estate company, a grocery store and a small pharmacy. He's also been a cattleman for almost 30 years.

A native of the small Clay County town of Ashland, Governor Riley is married to the former Patsy Adams, also from Clay County. He is a member of the First Baptist Church of Ashland, where he taught the men's Sunday school class for a number of years and also served as Chairman of the Church's Board of Trustees. The Rileys were blessed with four children and are the proud grandparents of eight grandchildren.

Interview with Phi Kappa Sigma

PKS: What made you choose to join Phi Kappa Sigma?

Governor Riley: There was a young man who later became my Big Brother who invited me to play in an intramural football game with him and a group of Phi Kaps. After that game I began to associate with so many of those young guys that after about six months I said you know I've never been in a fraternity but if I was ever going to be in one I'd like to join with these people I've come to know and appreciate.

PKS: Who ended up being your Big Brother?

Governor Riley: Gary Jackson. He lives in Birmingham and is still one of the best friends I think I have ever had. If there was one person that was probably responsible for me going with Phi Kappa it would have been Gary.

...the great thing about these relationships, we had a Phi Kap party at the Governor's Mansion about a year ago. All of us are you know 45 years older, but within five minutes it was like no time had passed. I mean it was like you were just picking up a conversation from back then.

... that's one of the great things about a fraternity. You really do become very, very close to a lot of guys and the influence they have on your life truly is dramatic. And I wondered whether or not, when we got back together after 30 or 40 years, how it would be. But it was almost seamless, as if no time had passed.

PKS: How many Brothers do you still keep in touch with?

Governor Riley: You know there are so many of them that now live out of state that I don't have an opportunity to see. But there's a guy here in Montgomery that was a Phi Kap that now is the Deputy Commissioner of our Conservation Department, Hobbie Sealy. I had not seen him in 25 years. He had retired from the Air Force, moved back here, and as soon as I saw him I said hey, man, that's a guy that I want in my cabinet serving with me and I brought him in.

... there's probably seven or eight that are still in Alabama that I see on a regular basis, at University of Alabama football games or something like that. But the others, normally it's going to take a reunion event for us all to get together.

PKS: Are there any of these brothers that particularly had a significant impact on your life?

Governor Riley: Yes. Gary Jackson is one of these guys that is the kind of man that you hope your son grows up to be like. One who just embodies all the qualities of character and integrity that I think all of us want our kids to understand and appreciate.

But there were other people there that; gosh, outside of Gary I hate to start naming names because I'm going to leave someone out. But there were so many people that had a really dramatic influence on my life. And there were guys who really helped me with the academic sessions!

There were a couple of guys that after we had graduated from college, that we helped each other with business opportunities; some successful, some less so. But yes, there was something about the fraternity friendship that allowed us to transcend the normal business relationship.

PKS: What leadership roles did you have as an undergraduate, either in your chapter on campus or within the community? And what are some of the things you learned you know from those roles?

Governor Riley: I never really had a leadership role in the fraternity. I was a sophomore when I pledged and I got my degree three years after I started.

I was in Phi Kappa only about a year-and-a-half because I got married my last year there. So you know all of the functions that we had and the people that were there for me it was for a very short period of time compared to others who had a four or five-year run. So I never did have a leadership role of any type while I was in the house. But I hope I was a good member and a good follower.

PKS: Were you involved on campus at all, because that's actually very interesting that you ended up in this ultimate leadership position. What were some of those initial leadership roles that started you down that path of wanting to do that?

Governor Riley: You know no one ever believes this when I say it, but no, I wasn't involved with campus politics. I didn't do anything like that. I was probably one of the most non-political people you would have ever met.

I didn't like politics, didn't really like politicians. But then I really kind of got into politics when I was in my 50's, early 50's and decided I wanted to participate. But up until then I never was very political.

...my son was SGA president there (at Alabama) and he said, "I learned more about human nature that one year that I was SGA president at Alabama than anything I've ever done before or since." And I think that's true, because with SGA you do it at a level where it's really concentrated and all the decisions that you make have an immediate impact.

And that's why I recommended to my children, to go out and get involved in these activities because it really is a great training ground. I didn't have the opportunity to do it, but in a lot of ways I wish -- when I look back on it -- I wish I had.

PKS: When you think about your undergrad experience, can you sum it up in terms of the positive impact that it had on you and how that helped you achieve success in life?

Governor Riley: Absolutely. If you have an opportunity for higher education, or whether you're in the military, or you're in a social club, or you're in a church group, whether or not you're in a fraternity, you begin to take on the characteristics of the people that are around you. You begin to develop, especially at that age, characteristics and convictions that you think have value based on something other than just a temporal conversation.

When you look at the young men that I had an opportunity to get to know and become great friends with, I think it helps you define who you are, what you believe, and how willing you are to stand up for those beliefs. And you come to do that as a result of your associations, with people that you respect.

The positive impact of seeing the characteristics that I wanted to emulate from people that I had a tremendous amount of respect for -- you begin to mirror those traits. But corporately, as a group, you could almost watch that house and that fraternity take on a defining personality of its own, because of the coalescing of all of the attitudes of the individual members.

And you watch them and you watch how they handle adversity. You watch how they develop leadership skills. You watch them deal with difficult personal problems.

You could learn these things, I guess, in a lot of different areas, but there's something about the concentration of the brotherly friendships that makes it so much more dramatic and evident when it is in a fraternity.

And the 3 o'clock in the morning discussions that you have about the meaning of life or religion or politics, that's priceless.

That's when that concentration with people that you really know and who really care about you; I think that can become a defining point in life for a lot of people who get to be in fraternities.

PKS: When you think of those characteristics that you wanted to emulate and brothers around you, what were some of those that stand out to you as things that you learned and traits that you gained by being associated with other members of the fraternity?

Governor Riley: One of the things that I think probably stands out as much to me today as anything else is the sense of camaraderie, instances that I can remember vividly today, where there was an esprit de corps that brought all of us together. Whether it was in competition in football or whether it was going against the Sigma Nus that were across the street.

I had never, up until that time, ever been involved in anything where a group of young men came together with different talents, different attributes, and molded into something – that became a functioning unit that was able to accomplish a goal.

And I look back on it now, whether it was scholastic competition or whatever – everyone there had a common goal and all of us worked together. The memory of that esprit de corps has meant a lot to me. Every time I have started a business I've tried to develop that type of camaraderie among all of the people that are on the team.

PKS: We talked about traits and camaraderie, if you peel it back one level further and you talk about the kind of the principals and the values that were represented in Phi Kappa Sigma, not only when you were there, but as it is today, how important do you think those values are in society and in your current occupation in life?

Governor Riley: Oh I think it is critically important. The reason I joined that fraternity was because of the people and what they believed. Now there were other fraternities who had different philosophies, different standards that I would have never been comfortable in and I'm sure they wouldn't have been comfortable with me.

But on the other side, when you have this amalgamation of all of these different personalities, but yet they have the same beliefs, have the same moral standards and values, have the same direction that they want to follow in life, that builds that esprit de corps. Because you recognize that you are a part of that special university or that special fraternity -- it represents you and you represent it. As Governor, that is a philosophy I have followed in choosing my Cabinet and staff.

...I guess one of the things that I have realized over the years is that all of us, whether we like it or not, have a moral compass. And there's no question in my

mind that we have an ethical standard. We have a faith that may change from time to time.

But all of us know the difference, we just innately know the difference, between right and wrong. And I guess one thing that I tried to teach my children, and I try to live by as well, is to keep it black and white as much as you can, because the gray areas only cause to confuse and irritate.

In most things, people have a gut sense of what they need to do. When you begin to trust that and trust that your instincts are right based on what you believe, I think it serves you well. Davy Crockett had a great slogan. He said something like 'be sure you're right then go ahead.'

PKS: What you just said probably has a big impact on how you're handling a pretty difficult and divisive issue in the whole gambling thing. I'd like to know how values and probably what you just said have played into that issue for you and your decision making process.

Governor Riley: It's a huge fight and someone asked me the other day -- he said you know this was supposed to be your lame duck year and why are you doing this at this time? Because if you look back over the last six or seven years, Alabama's had remarkable progress in education and economic development. Those reforms have been my focus.

But this fight really was an easy decision for me. This doesn't come down to whether or not you believe in gambling. It's whether or not we believe that all people must be treated equally under the law. And that no one, just because they're powerful or politically connected, or politically influential, should be able to disobey the law. That's really what this is all about.

It's about whether or not you're going to allow two or three big casino owners to continue to do something that has been shut down in all the other parts of the state. And again, this is about the rule of law. Everyone has to be subject to the same law and we have to treat everyone equally under the law. Alabama has had a history and had to learn great life lessons in treating certain people differently. I am committed to never go down that path.

And politically -- you know I really don't know if it helps or hurts me. You can't serve as governor and allow that to be the determining factor. I mean, you must do what you think is right. I think everyone must be treated equally under the law and as long as I'm Governor they're going to be.

PKS: The fraternity has kind of had a renaissance of sorts over the last 10 years and we've really set a vision for ourselves, "lifelong growth and development of the fraternity and its members."

A foundational premise of that vision is that we develop men. And we believe that developing men is important. Our tag line, our mantra has become, "Men of Honor." And we really have worked hard to try to set the standard that we want to behave as honorable men and that that's what one should aspire to be when they join Phi Kappa Sigma.

What do you think "Men of Honor" means?

Governor Riley: My granddad had an old saying, "it takes no talent to do it wrong, but it takes a real man of honor to always do it right."

I mean anybody can go break the law -- anybody can do it wrong -- that takes no real talent. But to do it right time and time again, even when it's difficult to do, to tell the truth even when it hurts, to be honest even when you know no one would ever know you weren't, that's what separates a man of honor from one who's not.

PKS: If you could give one piece of advice to our members, what would that be?

Governor Riley: Value what makes you unique as an individual. Learn to appreciate your uniqueness. Don't try to fit into a mold someone else sets for you. Because you may never live up to someone else's standard. But if you can ever truly know and appreciate what makes you special, and you live up to your own moral standard, it should bode well for you in the future.

PKS: It was an extreme honor for us to come to Alabama to meet you to present the Phi Kappa Sigma Alumni of the Year Award. What did it mean to you as a person to receive that?

Governor Riley: I think it surprised all the other members of the fraternity probably as much as it did me! But yes, any time you're recognized, especially by a fraternity that is very special to you, and all of your brothers and their families show up to help celebrate that recognition, it has to be a very humbling experience for anyone and it certainly was for me.

It was also a real highlight of my long association with the University of Alabama and with the Phi Kaps.

PKS: You actually made mention of this when we presented you with the award. You mentioned that Steve Windom, the former Lieutenant Governor of Alabama and also a Phi Kap from Alpha Kappa, you two ran against each other in the primary for governor. What was that like and what conversations did you two have about that?

Governor Riley: It was intense. And I reminded him the Phi Kap mantra says you can't speak ill of your brother! After we ran against each other Steve became one of my closest friends. No one could have ever been more supportive than he was in helping me be elected the first time and he has remained a great friend.

Governor Riley: Awesome, excellent. Governor Riley, I can't thank you enough.

Governor Riley: You're more than welcome and I appreciate it. Keep up the great work, guys; any way I can ever help you, let me know.

PKS: Where's the best place to get barbecue in Alabama?

Governor Riley: You realize you're going to get me in trouble with this. (laughing) Well you know Dreamland is great, but my personal favorite is a place called the Golden Rule in Birmingham -- sliced, inside, extra sauce, extra pickles.

PKS: What goes through your mind when you drive back into Alabama after visiting a neighboring state and see your name as Governor on the welcome to Alabama sign?

Governor Riley: True story; the first time I ever saw that the thing that flashed through my mind was what my granddad would have thought. And I can see him now up there just shaking his head with absolute bewilderment. It means a lot that people respect you enough or trust you enough to elect you to try to lead a state. It is humbling, but I always remember that my granddad was one of these guys that would never let anything go to my head. He always had a way of keeping me grounded. And every time I see something like those signs I remember some of the admonitions he gave me.

PKS: Do you have any special talents or hobbies? Or how do you like to spend your limited free time?

Governor Riley: There are a lot of things that I enjoy doing that I just don't have time to do now, but next year I hope I can. I love to ride motorcycles. I've got a trip planned for after I'm out of here. I want to take a motorbike ride to Alaska and back, which will take about six weeks and I'm looking forward to it.

...I've had a Gold Wing, but I'm planning on a new Harley. Waiting til I'm out of office so it will still be under warranty because this'll be about a 10,000 mile ride.

Love to ride. Love to scuba dive. Love to fly light planes. Love to hunt. I'm trying to learn how to fly fish but I'm not very good at it.

PKS: What goes through your mind when you hear the line in "Sweet Home Alabama" that says, "In Birmingham they love the Governor?"

Governor Riley: Guys, I don't know how to explain this, but it just doesn't get any better than that. (laughing)

PKS: Obviously it was a big year for the state of Alabama with a national championship. What were your thoughts on that?

Governor Riley: Well we had a unique circumstance. I told you that Patsy and I got married in 1964. Being the romantic that I am, I carried my wife on our honeymoon to the Orange Bowl to watch Alabama play Texas. This was back when Joe Namath was the quarterback and they had a linebacker in Texas named Tommy Nobis.

I never will forget, we lost that game on a quarterback sneak and everyone asked Coach Bryant later whether or not he thought Namath had scored. And I remember his remarks. He said, "Well if he'd been five yards in the end zone no one would have asked."

We waited for 45 years to have an opportunity to play for the National Championship again and I made sure Patsy and I were there.