

NORTH BRUNSWICK NBM MAGAZINE

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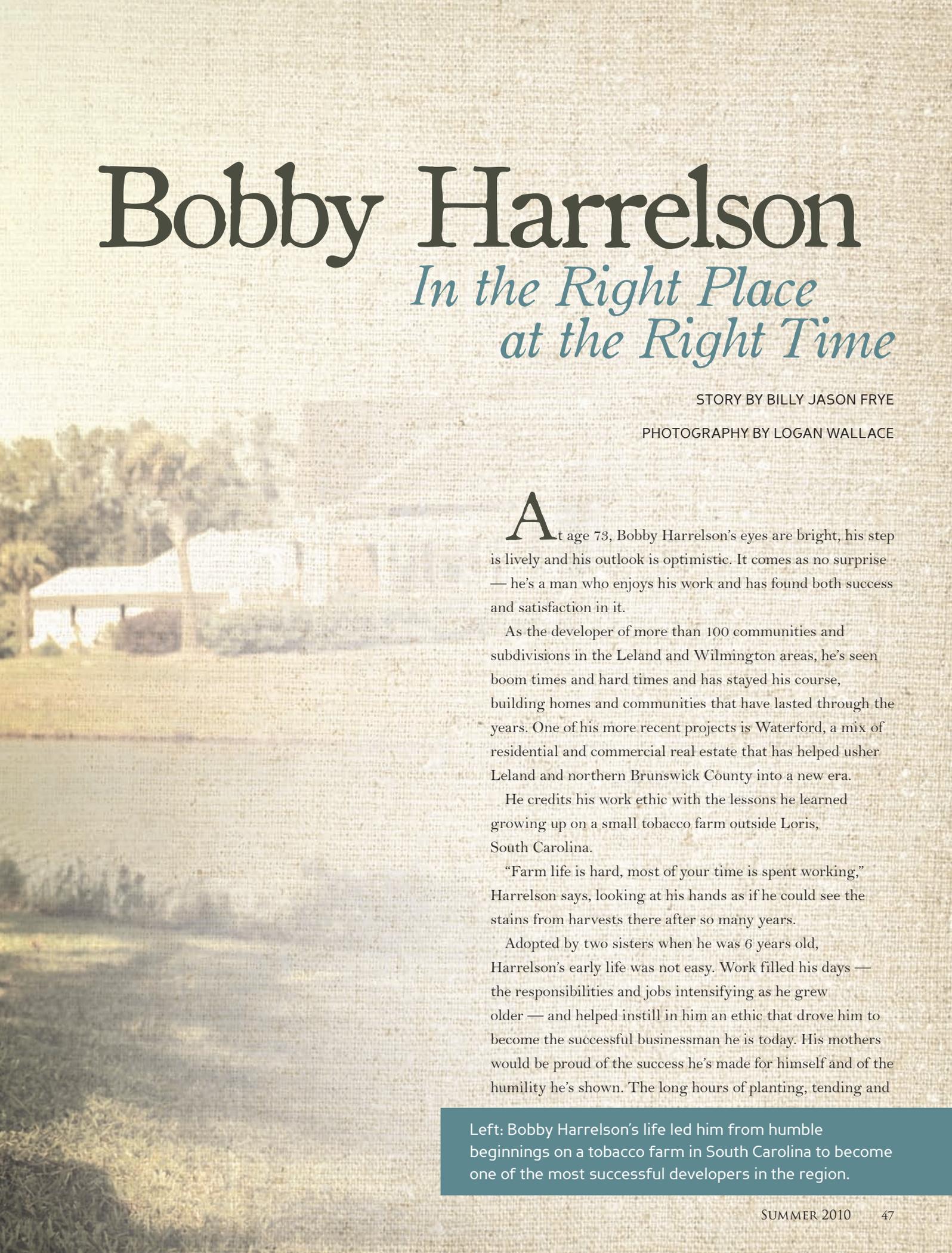
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Bobby Harrelson

In the Right Place at the Right Time

STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOGAN WALLACE

At age 73, Bobby Harrelson's eyes are bright, his step is lively and his outlook is optimistic. It comes as no surprise — he's a man who enjoys his work and has found both success and satisfaction in it.

As the developer of more than 100 communities and subdivisions in the Leland and Wilmington areas, he's seen boom times and hard times and has stayed his course, building homes and communities that have lasted through the years. One of his more recent projects is Waterford, a mix of residential and commercial real estate that has helped usher Leland and northern Brunswick County into a new era.

He credits his work ethic with the lessons he learned growing up on a small tobacco farm outside Loris, South Carolina.

"Farm life is hard, most of your time is spent working," Harrelson says, looking at his hands as if he could see the stains from harvests there after so many years.

Adopted by two sisters when he was 6 years old, Harrelson's early life was not easy. Work filled his days — the responsibilities and jobs intensifying as he grew older — and helped instill in him an ethic that drove him to become the successful businessman he is today. His mothers would be proud of the success he's made for himself and of the humility he's shown. The long hours of planting, tending and

Left: Bobby Harrelson's life led him from humble beginnings on a tobacco farm in South Carolina to become one of the most successful developers in the region.

“Part of it is being in the right place at the right time. I’ve been blessed enough to find myself in those circumstances a few times.”



harvesting shaped him and his view on life and work.

“On our farm, there was little time to play and few distractions and games save the ones you came up with yourself,” Harrelson says. “You cherished your relaxation time and took pleasure in simple things. You valued what you worked for and you were rewarded for your work. I gained two things growing up like this, two things I value deeply: an appreciation for what I have and a sense of self-worth and accomplishment that’s hard to find anywhere else.”

Harrelson has accomplished a lot. In the early 1990s he began to develop properties near Leland, starting with

Magnolia Greens. Shortly after it was completed, he began to see changes in Leland as it responded to the new development. Small changes at first — the grocery stores and fast food chains were busier — then larger changes as new businesses popped up and existing businesses began to remodel and revamp their offerings. With Magnolia Greens he saw what could be in Leland; in a few short years he set out to achieve this vision with Waterford.

“One of the most difficult things to overcome with Waterford and even with Magnolia Greens was the zip code,” says Harrelson. “For some reason there was this perception that Leland wasn’t the place to be. I never understood it. It’s beautiful. Peaceful. You’re only five minutes to Wilmington and twenty to the beach. What’s not to love?”

But, as it turned out, buyers certainly shared his vision of the area, purchasing residential and commercial property in Waterford as soon as it was released. With the mix of property types, Waterford kick-started the boom on the Leland side of the bridge.

“For so long there was a lack on this side of the river,” Harrelson says. “What we tried to do here was introduce a commercial and residential center, not a downtown per se, but an extension of downtown. Our hope was that others would follow suit and this area would be booming in a short time.”

It worked. The commercial development at Waterford includes the Waterford Village Shoppes, which houses a Harris Teeter, The House of Wine and Cheese, Port City Java, a half-dozen restaurants serving everything from Tex-Mex to Carolina barbecue, medical facilities, a bookstore and free summer concerts on the lawn.

But it didn’t stop with Waterford’s commercial development. Across the street from Waterford is Cross Creek Commons, the huge shopping center that was built shortly after Waterford. In addition to retail and commercial space holding everything from offices to video game stores, many more restaurants have opened, the Super Walmart is always busy, and two hotels have been built to serve the growing number of visitors to the area.

Behind Cross Creek Commons there is a pair of housing developments. Across the street at the entrance of Magnolia Greens, the commercial development has grown. And just a mile down the road, Brunswick Forest is offering residential and commercial property, attracting a Lowe’s foods and a soon-to-be-built Cineplex.

Harrelson’s vision was for Waterford to ripple outward and impact the quality of life in Leland and Brunswick County. His developments, along with others in the area, have taken

Above: Harrelson’s hugely successful Magnolia Greens and Waterford communities kick-started the boom for Leland.

secret, sleepy Brunswick County and made it into one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation and one of the most desirable locations in the region.

“It’s no wonder people want to live here,” Harrelson says. “We didn’t try to sell property or houses, we tried to sell the place. The climate. The natural amenities. The quality of life.”

It’s an easy sell: mild winters, sunny summers, the beach, river and Intracoastal Waterway, an airport and university nearby, year-round golf, a tax rate significantly lower than many places new residents were and are coming from.

“Once people saw what we had in Brunswick County, they wanted to come,” Harrelson says. “All we had to do was supply the houses. The businesses followed suit. Since then, it’s taken on a life of its own.”

Supplying the houses isn’t as easy as clearing a lot and pouring a footer; it starts with a passion for doing it right and a vision for the finished product. Harrelson has both.

“Part of it is being in the right place at the right time,” he says. “I’ve been blessed enough to find myself in those circumstances a few times.”

In 1960 Harrelson moved to Wilmington and began working in construction. Two years later he was drafted into the Army until 1964. Returning to construction, he partnered with Jimmy Suggs and started Suggs and Harrelson Construction Company in just the right place at just the right time. Announcements that DuPont, Corning, Hercules and other companies were moving to Wilmington in 1965 meant a growing middle-class, which translated into a need for middle-class housing.

Suggs and Harrelson answered the call and built, found success and built more. In the late 1970s Harrelson bought out Suggs’ partnership in the company and continued to build. His uncanny foresight put him in the right place at the right time again and again. In the 1980s he sold his company to a larger developer and started again. Eventually he went on to develop Magnolia Greens with another partner, sold his interests and

moved on to Waterford and her sister properties.

But the vision for Waterford started with Magnolia Greens.

“Our most popular home sites in Magnolia Greens were the ones with a water view,” Harrelson says. “The ponds on our golf course were magnets for buyers. We built a test pond, one not on the golf course, and it sold out. We did another and it sold out. We knew we were onto something.”

When Harrelson purchased the Waterford property he decided to expand a 10-acre pond that was already there and design the community around water features.

“Nearly every home in Waterford is adjacent to water,” he says proudly. “Our residents kayak and paddle-boat to each others’ homes. Someone bought a pair of swans. I’d say the

community has embraced it.”

One of the reasons Waterford has met such success is the passion Bobby brings to his projects. This passion has been guiding him from early on. It led him from humble beginnings on a small South Carolina tobacco farm to become one of the most successful developers in the area. “I loved that

farm and I wanted to stay there, but I guess I was too ambitious,” he says.

As Harrelson puts it, “I always followed my passion. I’ve always done what I love and I’ve always been happy with what I’ve had. The success followed suit. I tell my grandson [who is in his first year of college] to follow his passions and to love what he does. I love what I do and it doesn’t feel like work. I enjoy it too much to call it work.”

Harrelson says that is the key. “Love what you do,” he says. “I grew up farming and I love the dirt. Now I get to grow a place for people, for families. I get to grow homes and communities that create friends and neighbors. I get to do what I love. What’s better than that?” ■



Above: What’s Harrelson’s advice for finding success? Do what you love and it doesn’t feel like work.