



■ Dan Barutic and Robert Teer Jr.

Family Building

Durham's transformation from a tobacco and textile hub with an estimated county population of 35,000 in 1910 into a major medical, educational and business center with nearly 250,000 residents in 2000 has been well documented.

Arguably, no one has a better claim to laying the literal foundation of modern Durham than a family enterprise, the eponymous Nello L. Teer Company formed in 1909. Nearly 100 years later, the company now survives as Teer Associates, a development firm headquartered at 100 Park Dr. in Research Triangle Park.

Nello's construction company thrived in its first few decades: by 1920, 200 men worked for Nello, and those

men had access to more than 300 company-owned mules. They used those resources to help build Duke's campuses, and later, after trucks replaced mules, RDU's runways and 17 sections of the Blue Ridge Highway. The company had some minor name changes over the years, but all along the name Teer has been front and center, as Nello Sr. passed on the presidency of the business to his oldest son, Nello Jr., in 1952 — and another son, R. Dillard, took on the vice president, secretary and treasurer posts.

Teer Associates has been run by Robert Teer Jr. — R. Dillard's son and Nello's grandson — since 1986. Teer began working for the family business right after he

TEER ASSOCIATES

graduated from East Carolina University in 1967. (He majored in business management and was a member of ECU's first graduating class.)

Nello Sr., who lived long enough to see his company grow into one of the largest contractors in the country, was the pivotal influence on Robert. Nello, he recalls, "would work from sunup to sundown," and remained active in the business while Robert got his education at George Watts Elementary School (he's a proud member of the school's alumni association) and Durham High School. Nello Sr. died in 1963, the same year his grandson graduated from DHS.

"I remember him quite vividly," says Robert. "It seemed like he was always home on the weekends. Dad

firm's No. 2 post. "That's four generations in this business," Robert says. "That's pretty unique. Normally it's the third generation that screws it up."

Robert has been a principal player in developing some of RTP's largest building projects, including parts of the IBM and Biogen complexes, GTE, Nortel, IBM, Glaxo, NetEdge, the Sigma Xi honor society and the Radisson Hotel. The company Web site says that, all told, Teer Associates "has developed over 2.5 million square feet of office, retail and hotel space in and around RTP." Most successful developers are known to do some boasting about their accomplishments. But Robert, by contrast, isn't shy about giving much of the credit for his own, and the business's success to his grandfather. "I learned from

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would take me out there (to Nello's house) and we'd have breakfast together." The talk was business then, and it is business now. Robert's extended family remains firmly rooted in Durham, and recently 24 of the brood gathered. "We talk about business every time we get together. It's been the thread of our family."

As he talks with a visitor at his office, Robert sits in a worn, light-brown leather padded chair, a cushioned, reclining roller that was given to his grandfather as a gift in 1924. All those weekend breakfasts with his grandfather and father — who ran the Durham and Southern Railroad, a company acquisition, when Robert was a boy — must have had some impact. Robert didn't do a smidgen of job-hunting as he neared graduation, knowing that he would join the family business. "I never contemplated doing anything else," he says.

Part of the company was sold in 1980; in 1986, Robert renamed what was left — the development arm of the company — Teer Associates. And he's preparing to pass on the reins to the fourth generation. His son-in-law, Dan Barutio, who's married to his daughter, Kristin, holds the

him that everything has a place and things should be organized and orderly and well-executed," he says. "Even without an advanced education, he had all that in his mind, and that's how he focused the company."

Nello Sr.'s formal education stopped after eighth grade, but it made a lot of sense, says Robert, for the family to honor him by donating a large chunk of money to Duke University to construct the Nello L. Teer Building, which houses the Vesic Library for Engineering, Mathematics, and Physics. "He started off with Mr. Duke, and 80 percent of our professional employees went to Duke or N.C. State."

And for different reasons, Robert purchased naming rights for the stage at the Durham Performing Arts Center, which opens later this year. "I wanted to honor my mother and father. My grandfather and my father and my uncle, in addition to running the Teer Company and making a living here, gave endless hours of time and effort to civic organizations and charities. It's a very big step for Durham. It will be a venue where a lot of people go, and I wanted to leave that legacy for them." **DM**