

WHIT &

Wisdom

Ocala Magazine's Person of The Year — Whit Palmer

Taking the helm as Chairman of the Foundation for the Florida Horse Park, Whit Palmer's leadership provides a blossoming year-round equine facility an opportunity to become a world-class centerpiece with a potential to bring an economic impact of \$75 million annually for the state of Florida.

STORY: JOHN SOTOMAYOR

WHIT PALMER IS darn near impossible to write about. For one thing, he's really humble. And another thing, well, he just doesn't want to talk about himself. And then, well, the other thing is, he's just really humble.

But ask him about his family, his native Ocala, or his thoughts for working, growing and helping others, and his eyes light up and sparkle.

"All my life I have loved this community and wanted the best things we are capable of providing for it," Palmer says. "We have an obligation, I think, to continually try to make things better."

Then, he adds with a smile, "Even after so-called retirement age."

Retirement, in fact, doesn't really exist in Palmer's vocabulary. At 82, he works a full schedule every day, juggling responsibilities with several companies while also donating valuable time on multiple boards. He's handy with his cell phone, quick with email, and always on the go.





In his lifetime, the third-generation Floridian with deep family roots in Marion County — Palmer’s grandmother ran a hotel in the area and his father prospered in the mining business which Palmer later followed, eventually becoming president and CEO of Dixie Lime and Stone Company — has spent time learning from those well established in the archives of history.

Among them are Florida governors, Lawton Chiles, Claude Kirk and Ocalan C. Farris Bryant, as well as Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court Stephen O’Connell. Others include Dr. Robert Marston, a University of Florida president, Rhodes Scholar and head of the National Institute of Health in Washington, DC; Dr. E.T. York, a U.S. presidential advisor and interim UF president; Wisdom O’Neal whose son, Patrick O’Neal, was a well-known actor and was Palmer’s college roommate; and Judge Harold Sebring who tried Nazis in the Nuremberg Trails.

During his college years, Palmer was a student at both the Sewanee Military

Gainesville and the Munroe Regional Medical Center’s board and foundation chair. He served as a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, Jacksonville Branch, Sun Trust Bank of Ocala, and College of Central Florida’s Board of Trustees.

CAMP BOGGY CREEK

In 1992, Palmer met up with actor Paul Newman, and the friends soon launched a unique philanthropic effort in Eustis, Fla., called Camp Boggy Creek – a special place where annually 1,300 children with chronic, life-threatening illnesses could learn, play and experience life to the fullest.

“It’s the charity from Heaven as far as I am concerned,” Palmer says, recalling the camp as one of the highlights of his life. He had just finished his term as Chairman of the Florida Council of 100, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization created by Ocalan Governor Farris Bryant as an advisory council to the governor that today promotes the economic growth of Florida and improves quality of life. Palmer remains

prison programs – is much improved.

“I was, and am, concerned about the huge increase in addictions in our society,” Palmer says. “The Phoenix House is an alternative to so many programs. Addiction – whether it is alcohol or prescription drugs or illegal drugs – is a major component to the problems of this country. Sixty percent of our prison populations are non-violent, drug-related offenders. At Phoenix House, those who do not have a high school diploma can get their GED and earn marketable skills to lead productive lives afterwards.”

FOUNDATION FOR THE FLORIDA HORSE PARK

In 2005, Palmer turned much attention toward the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park, a 500-acre property carved out of the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, situated in south Ocala between 475 and 475-A, just over a mile from the Belleview interchange off I-75.

Palmer notes that the property and its infrastructure are designed for varied

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Academy and at UF. Though he did not complete a degree at UF, his love for the university is reflected in his unwavering commitment to the institution.

To date, Palmer is the only person to simultaneously serve as president of the UF Alumni Association and president of the UF Foundation, and he is a past recipient of UF’s Distinguished Alumnus Award and the President’s Medallion.

Previously, he served as Chairman of Florida Crushed Stone Company, in partnership with Browne Gregg from 1970 to 1980, then entered the absorbent clay business with the purchase of MFM Industries.

His commitment to Florida’s economic growth has included serving on the boards of Florida TaxWatch, Florida Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, Shands Hospital in

a member of the Florida Council of 100.

During their work on the Camp Boggy Creek project, Palmer also had the opportunity to introduce Newman to Norman Schwarzkopf, the Army General who had recently returned from the Gulf War. Schwarzkopf also greatly contributed to the success of Camp Boggy Creek.

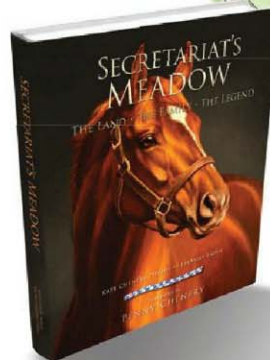
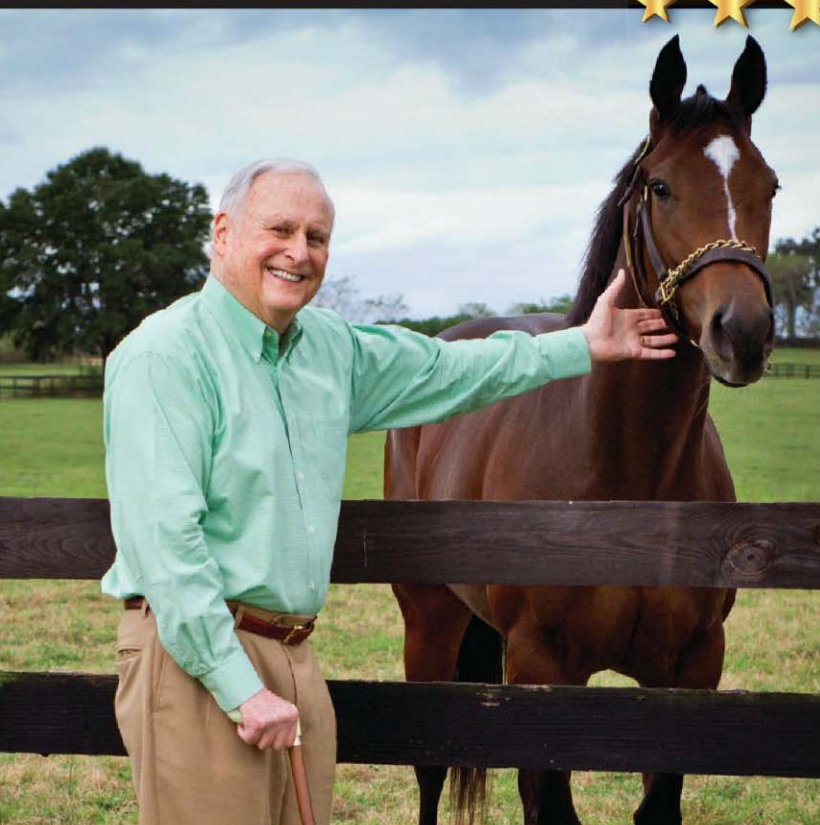
PHOENIX HOUSE

After the Camp Boggy Creek was well on its way, Palmer became a co-founder of Daytop Village (now Phoenix House) along with philanthropist Fred Fisher, a UF alumnus who established the Fisher School of Accounting. Together, Palmer and Fisher raised funds to create a unique facility in Citra, Fla., which assists 200 residents a year in overcoming addictions. At the center, recidivism – compared to recidivism in

interests. In the past year, the Park has hosted events ranging from not only Olympic-caliber international riders, but also the Junior League of Ocala’s Pig Out BBQ, which attracted several thousand attendees, as well as major RV shows, foot races, dog sporting events, and an upcoming HERO Rush firefighter event, which anticipates 4,000-6,000 attendees.

In 2009-2010, Palmer and Connie Wise, Chairperson of the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park, recognized the need for a fundraising arm for the Park. Together, Palmer and Wise developed a sister 501 c3 corporation – officially named the Foundation for the Florida Horse Park.

Fully launched in 2011, the foundation’s role is to partner with the Park to raise funds and awareness and continue establishing a world-class agricultural and ecotourism



Florida Horse
Park Master
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facility in Ocala/Marion County – Horse Capital of the World®, generating considerable economic impact, jobs and quality of life opportunities in Florida.

Palmer served as the founding chairman for the Foundation for the Florida Horse Park and continues to serve on its board. Using skills and contacts developed through decades of business, his guidance has positioned the foundation to thrive.

“We need wide-spread community support for this project, and not strictly from the equine industry,” Palmer says. “I think we will be successful building a facility that will be among the most prominent destination points this area has ever seen.”

One of Palmer’s first accomplishments with the foundation was to enlist an independent firm to conduct an economic impact study of the Park. The firm, PolyCom, concluded the Park will have a \$75 million annual economic impact on Marion County and the state of Florida upon final buildout. According to the studies, the Park already brings a \$15.1 million impact to Florida. The economic impact is far-reaching when you take into account that the Park attracts visitors who spend money eating at restaurants, buying gas, staying at hotels, and

overall retail expenditures.

In July 2011, the foundation hired an executive director, Summer Best, and has subsequently held regular fundraisers. In October, the Park hosted an Ocala Fall Farm Tour attended by 300 people, which included a day of visits to three major equine facilities. In November, the Park held an inaugural Legislative Trail Ride and Cookout, hosting 160 community leaders and legislators such as Senators Steve Oelrich and Alan Hayes, and Representative Elizabeth Porter. The event was fully sponsored by an army of volunteers, state and local businesses supportive of the Park’s goals.

The foundation’s next major fundraiser will be held Feb. 25, 2012, presented as an evening gala at the exquisite GoldMark Farm in Ocala. The event’s highlight will be an historic live presentation and book signing with Kate Chenery Tweedy, daughter of Penny Chenery – breeder and owner of famed racehorse Secretariat. Chenery Tweedy, who recently co-wrote a distinctive coffee table book entitled “Secretariat’s Meadow,” graciously offered her time to the Foundation for the Florida Horse Park for the evening. Tickets will be available in mid-January.

Palmer’s influence on the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park continues. Recently, he helped obtain a \$1 million grant from the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, which helped construct multiple infrastructures at the Park — including a concession area with bathrooms and showers, solidifying another foothold for Marion County as the Horse Capital of the World.

In Palmer’s quiet but busy office just off SR 200, photos of close friends and family members line the walls. He’s the proud dad of five children and nine grandchildren, and he and his wife, Diane, also keep up with two lively dogs, Abby and Ella B.

When Palmer talks about things he cares about, not only do his eyes sparkle – his whole demeanor is warm and engaging, with a touch of class and an old-fashioned Southern gentleman’s wit and wisdom.

“I continue to have a keen interest in civic and political affairs of our community,” he said. “It’s important. And it’s important that we all continue to dig in where we can, help where we can.”

For that reason and the aforementioned, Whit Palmer is *Ocala Magazine’s* Person of the Year. OM