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Furman's Iron Lady: Minor Mickel dies at 79

Minor Herndon Mickel, a longtime community stalwart in Greenville and one of the most influential leaders in Furman history, died February 18 after a lengthy illness. She was 79.

The first woman elected to chair the Furman board of trustees, Mrs. Mickel was the point person when, in October 1990, the board took the historic step of amending the university's charter to allow the board, rather than the South Carolina Baptist Convention, to elect Furman's trustees. The decision ultimately led to the severance of official ties between Furman and South Carolina Baptists.

During the 19 months between the trustees' action and the convention's vote to end its relationship with Furman in May of 1992, Mrs. Mickel presided over intense board meetings, attended countless sessions involving Furman administrators and lawyers and convention representatives, and made frequent appearances at press conferences, media gatherings and faculty meetings.

Throughout the negotiations, she displayed an extraordinary combination of grace and courage, while expressing clearly, consistently and forthrightly her faith in the board's decision to amend its charter. As she told *Furman Magazine* in the summer of 1992, "I never truly thought we would not come out well in the end. I knew the worst that could happen would be a lawsuit, and that would have been a terrible thing, but I felt so strongly that we were legally right that I was sure the courts would rule in our favor."

Her calm nature, steely resolve and commitment to the board's independence and to the university's best interests were just what Furman needed during those stressful times. When the issue of the university's governance was finally settled, Furman's president, John E. Johns, who stood on the firing line with Mrs. Mickel throughout the crisis, said admiringly of his friend, "She is a strong leader and sound thinker. . . [she] has been Furman's Iron Lady."

Furman awarded her an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree in 1993,



President David Shi says Minor Mickel was "a pillar of the modern development of Furman and of the Greenville community."

recognizing her generous nature, extraordinary leadership and contributions to the community.

After her death Johns told *The Greenville News*, "Minor was a great strength to me personally, and to the entire board. She was a leader who had very thoughtfully planned the course she needed to take, and she was masterful in the way she did it."

A native of Georgia and a graduate of the University of Georgia, Mrs. Mickel married her childhood sweetheart, Buck Mickel, in 1946. Buck, who died in July 1998, was, like his wife, a giant in the Greenville community and a key figure in the city's growth and development. In 1965, after the death of his uncle, Charles E. Daniel, he was named president and general manager of Daniel Construction Company, the international firm that built many of the buildings on the Furman campus. He later became vice chair of the board of Fluor Corporation, which acquired Daniel in 1977.

His wife worked side by side with him to help improve the quality of life in the Greenville area. She served on the boards of a variety of agencies and organizations, from the Phillis Wheatley

Community Center and United Way to the Peace Center for the Performing Arts and the Greenville Hospital Foundation. She also had a keen mind for business and was on the boards of RSI Corporation, a company her husband helped to found, and MICCO Corporation, an investment company she established with her children.

Baxter Wynn, associate pastor at Greenville's First Baptist Church, told *The Greenville News* that the Mickels "were very much a team — full partners in his business and community concerns. It was an extraordinary partnership for its time."

Before beginning the first of her three terms on the Furman board of trustees, Mrs. Mickel served on the university's Advisory Council. The Mickels and their family also made significant contributions to the university. Funds from the family provided the naming gift for the university's Minor Herndon Mickel Tennis Center, and the Mickels' gifts helped ensure the construction of Timmons Arena, Richard W. Riley Hall and John E. Johns Hall. The Mickels also established Furman's first Presidential Scholarship, which covers all university costs.

But Minor Mickel's most enduring legacy to the university will be her leadership and fortitude during the Baptist crisis of the early 1990s. After the situation was resolved, she offered her vision of what the future held for Furman.

"I really believe Furman can become the finest university of its size in the country," she told *Furman Magazine*. "A lot of people are watching to see what we will do."

Of her own role in Furman's groundbreaking decision, she added, with characteristic charm and humility, "It's been a very stressful time, but I honestly have enjoyed every minute of it. I've made wonderful friends and gotten more out of it than I could possibly give. I'm glad I was able to be part of this historic process."

— Jim Stewart