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82-year-old still leading by example

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JACKSON — After 52 years heading his hotel management business, Earle Jones still arrives at his Flowood office every day because he finds work stimulating and the industry interesting.

But talk to him a few minutes and another equally important reason comes flooding out as to why at 82 he hasn't retired.

He cares deeply about people.

Jones, founder and co-chairman of MMI Hotel Group, will be inducted into the Mississippi Business Hall of Fame on May 12, a recognition of his stewardship, community involvement and dedication.

The Hotel Group manages 20 lodging properties in the Southeast. MMI Dining Systems, a sister company formed in 1993, provides food services by contract to more than 120 schools, colleges, senior communities and hotels.

"I've tried to analyze what it is about him," Jackson businessman and longtime friend Bill Cooley said. "He has the ability to forget self. It's quite a trick. He kisses himself goodbye in the morning and can focus externally all day."

Jones, who lives in Jackson, entered the industry by chance in the mid-1950s. He was working in his native southern California following service in the Navy when former roommate and Mississippian Mike Sturdivant, whose family was in the lodging industry, called with a proposal. Sturdivant's family had gotten one of the early Holiday Inn franchises and planned to open in Meridian.

"He said to me, 'If you come to Mississippi and take the job, I'll pay half your fare. If you don't take it, you've got to pay the whole thing.' It worked out rather well for me and my wife," Jones said.

That hotel became a great success in the 1960s mainly because I-20 dumped out nearby, Jones said.

His second property, in Columbia, S.C., wasn't as lucky. In fact, business was terrible. He found himself traveling often to improve the hotel's performance. He learned from the experience that pride and self assuredness can be snuffed by reality.

"I've always felt that bad times have great opportunity," he said.

Some of the key findings that he applied decade after decade as MMI grew didn't come from adversity, rather through case studies at Harvard Business School where he earned a master's degree.

It's vital for management to listen to employees and find out who they really are; managers should exhibit a steady mood and be of high moral character, he said.

"When you treat people the way they should be treated, the way we do, then the possibility of people retiring with you increases," Jones said.

Staffers from each hotel property, once or twice a year, would get flown to a company meeting.

"They could be themselves there and open up. We could find out if there were issues because their immediate management wasn't there. It was amazing, at first, we'd ask if it had been their first plane trip and all these hands would go up. We'd find it was their first hotel stay," he said. "We'd share figures with them, and they'd take ownership in the process."

MMI began its dining systems business in the early 1990s because Jones saw hotels getting out of food service.

"They'd be serving three meals a day but only making money on breakfast because that's when people were around. Contract feeding is an attractive business because it's got a low overhead," he said.

MMI contracts locally with St. Richard's Catholic Church, Belhaven College, Jackson Academy, the Jackson Yacht Club and other venues. MMI Hotel Group has the two metro-area Cabot Lodges and numerous other properties.

Retired Catholic Diocese of Jackson Bishop William Houck served with Jones on school and community boards and in civic affairs. He called Jones a sterling character who cares about the community and about others.

"Part of what makes him effective is his vision, his determination and his care to do things well," Houck said. "He wants to see people do as well as himself."

Cooley, chairman of Systems Companies, pointed out Jones' philanthropic bend.

“He’s invested back into the community,” he said. “To me, he takes social responsibility to another level. People in his business are family, not just employees.”