

— 2007 Lorenelle White Lifetime Achievement Award Winner —



WILLIAM T. BRIGHT

Bright Enterprises • Summersville

By BETH GORCZYCA RYAN

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SUMMERSVILLE — Since he was a teen, **Bill Bright** has always been a force to be reckoned with in West Virginia business.

He's owned everything from a fundraiser supply company to a coal company to a ski resort. He's started numerous other businesses, most of which have been successful, and he now dedicates time and money to helping other entrepreneurs start their ventures.

In fact, starting businesses, running businesses and being in business are so much a part of Bright's life, identity and passion that now after more than five decades of running companies, Bright has no idea how many companies he has owned.

It's more than he can count on his hand, or even both hands.

"I'd say I've owned a good deal more than a dozen businesses in my life, a good deal more," he said while sitting in his office at the **Bright Enterprises** and **Bright of America** complex near Summersville. "But I've never really slowed down to count them."

Bright's long history as a mover and shaker within West Virginia's business community, not to mention his longstanding dedication to creating jobs and opportunities in the state, is part of the reason why he was selected this year to receive The State Journal's Lorenelle White Lifetime Achievement Award.

"I applaud The State Journal for recognizing the outstanding work and leadership of Bill Bright. Bill is a West Virginia business giant who has created companies, employed people, paid taxes, created additional investment and reinvested in our statewide community and spe-



BETH GORCZYCA RYAN / The State Journal
Above, Bill Bright decorates his office at Bright Enterprises with pictures of family members as well as pictures of politicians he's met over the years. During his five-plus decades in business, he's met several governors as well as a few United States presidents.

Bill Bright's office sits next door to Bright of America, the Summersville-based company he and his brother John founded. Bright sold the company in 1990 to Russ Berrie & Co., which kept the operation and its employees in Nicholas County.

cifically the community in which he and his family live," said **Steve Roberts**, president of the **West Virginia Chamber of Commerce**. "He exemplifies the spirit of (late State Journal owner and publisher) **Lorenelle White**."



A Life in Business

Bright has always been a hard worker. His first paying job came in the eighth grade as a lawn boy for some of his neighbors. But working for others wasn't in his plans. A few years before working as a lawn boy,

Bright and one of his friends, **Alan Fitzwater**, started selling worms they shocked out of the ground to local fishermen. The business lasted about three years, but firmly implanted in

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the young man a dream to start his own business some day.

Little did he know at the time, but his next business venture was just a few years off.

While in college at **West Virginia University**, Bright and his brother, **John**, started traveling around to different churches during the Christmas season to take pictures of them decorated in their holiday splendor. The brothers' goal was to then sell those pictures back to the church the following year in the form of Christmas cards, postcards and note cards. The churches could then sell the cards as a fundraiser.

By marketing themselves through direct mail, the brothers' business soon had churches as customers from around the nation. To meet churches' needs, the brothers would travel in the summer with their car loaded to the top with fake poinsettias and Christmas greenery to give churches the Christmas look even when it was sweltering outside.

It was a lot to keep track of while also trying to balance college. But the Brights were able to prosper. In fact, the business did so well, the brothers hired a bunch of Bill Bright's **Sigma Nu** fraternity brothers to work for them.

"They liked working for us, and I learned a lot of lessons from the church graphics business on how to manage people and how to use direct mail," Bright said.

Once Bright graduated from college, he and his brother expanded their little company and gave it the name **Bright of America**. They moved their operations out of their family's Summersville home and the company quickly grew to become a major supplier of note cards, postcards, candles, commemorative plates, placemats and just about everything else to churches, women's clubs and other non-profit groups.

"At one time we were the largest placemat manufacturer in the country. We would make those laminated placemats with pictures of the state on them. People would buy a whole set of

their state."

The company grew quickly, and by the late 1980s, Bright of America had become an international fundraising graphics, paper converting and marketing firm with between 500 and 1,000 employees and \$20 million in sales.

"I knew all of the employees by name," Bright said.

Coal Business to Diversification

Even while running Bright of America, Bright and his brother were always on the lookout for new business ventures. And by the 1970s, their search took John to Roanoke and brought Bright back to the world of coal.

"I'd been watching people do well and decided I'd get into the coal business too," he said.

He had some experience working in the coal industry. Bright's father, **P.W.**, was a business manager for coal companies in Mullens and Nicholas County while Bright was growing up. He taught Bright the ins and the outs of the industry at an early age. And during the 1950s, Bright worked for a while in an underground mine.

So when he decided to get into mining, it was like coming home to a business he'd always known. Bright founded **Bright Coal Group** in 1976 and spent his time focused on the selling and acquisition side of the coal industry. The company grew rapidly, and soon became the largest independently owned coal company in the state.

The mines had a slew of employees, but Bright said his best employee was none other than his father. **P.W. Bright** came to work in the front office of his son's business after he retired from another coal company.

"He worked for us for years," Bright said. "He loved coming in and stamping the backs of the checks. It made him proud to see us doing all right."

Bright said of all of the businesses he's owned, the coal

company was one of his favorites.

"It's kind of a macho thing," he said. "It's rugged and down to earth. And, I enjoyed working with the men."

The mine did fairly well, and when the coal market took a turn for the worse in



Photo courtesy of Bill Bright
In the 1950s, Bill Bright worked in underground coal operations. In the 1970s, he turned around and formed his own coal company, which eventually became the largest independently owned coal company in the state.

the 1980s, Bright was able to buy up additional reserves other coal companies were selling off. Bright Coal Group also opened up new doors for Bright, helping him start both a timbering operation and get involved in land development, including Bright Mountain Estates, which received public recognition for being environmentally responsible.

But by the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bright decided the timing was right to diversify. So he sold off Bright Coal Group to two large companies listed on the **New York Stock Exchange**. He also sold Bright of America to **Russ Berrie & Co.**, which kept the company's operations in Summersville.

After the sales were complete, Bright started looking for other places to invest in. What he found was two busi-

nesses that could help Raleigh County if properly developed — **Winterplace Ski Resort** and **Glade Springs Resort**. Bright bought Winterplace in 1992, and purchased Glade Springs the following year.

"We saw an opportunity to make improvements in both," he said. "We were in the position to purchase them ... so that's what we did."

The ski resort was about bankrupt when Bright bought it. But through a lot of hard work, major investment and sheer determination, the ski area south of Beckley is now a thriving tourist destination attracting people not only from West Virginia but other states as well.

Bright said he visits Winterplace often during the ski season. Sometimes he goes to swoosh down the slopes for an afternoon or evening. Other times, he just goes to see what's going on. And every time he stops at the resort he feels a beaming sense of pride. The resort has grown so much in recent years, adding new features and upgrading equipment almost every season. The parking lot always seems full. And the people Bright said he sees always seem to be having a great time.

"I'm really proud of it," he said. "**Terry Pfeiffer** (Winterplace's president) does a superior job there. ... And I feel good with the fact we have been able to build it up and that people have fun there."

He said he loves the fact the ski area has karaoke contests on weekends and other activities to get people socializing. He said that is an important part of the whole skiing experience. Sure it's important to get down the hill, but it's also important to have fun once a person is at the bottom. And he knows that from first-hand experience. Bright, a longtime skier, met the woman who would become

his wife, **Patty**, while standing at the bottom of a ski slope at **Seven Springs Mountain Resort** in Pennsylvania.

When he talks about that chance encounter 36 years ago, his eyes still sparkle and he proudly proclaims that to be his best skiing experience ever.

In addition to investing in Glade Springs and Winterplace, Bright also became a passive investor in other companies and started investing in hedge funds. All of that was to further his attempts to diversify.

“We’ve been in hedge funds since 1992,” Bright said. “Some people look down on them, but we think they are wonderful.”

Not All Been Easy

Bright said while he’s been blessed to have a successful life overall, he did experience stumbles and troubles along the way.

“I don’t want to come across as arrogant,” he said. “I know what it is like to make payroll, and I know what it is like to sweat whether you’ll make payroll.”

He said one of the most important things for business owners, entrepreneurs and others to realize is that every business has tough times, and every business leader strikes out sometimes. Owners and bosses will make mistakes, make bad calls and miss opportunities. But that is just the nature of business. And to be successful, he said, business owners have to wait out those terrible and scary times and be wise enough to learn from past mistakes.

“Don’t be afraid to admit you did something wrong,” he said, adding, “Some of the best decisions I’ve ever made happened when I changed my mind.”

Through all of his ups and downs, Bright said he’s kept his focus on his family, which included another brother, **George**, as well as his three grown daughters — **Anne**, **Elizabeth** and **Sara**. He said



Photo courtesy of Bill Bright

Bill and Patty Bright celebrated their twin grandchildren's first birthday in October.

his parents, P.W. and **Jennie**, were huge supporters of his and always encouraged him to follow his dreams and strive to be the best person he could.

In fact to this day, Bill Bright credits his father with being his primary mentor and role model.

“He taught me that I could do anything I wanted to do. He encouraged me to have good self esteem and reminded me ‘You are what you think you are,’” Bright said.

Bright’s Summersville office is a testament to his father’s love, devotion and guiding hand that helped him not only in his professional life, but also in his academic and personal life.

Behind Bright’s desk is a sign that reads “Brights Never Give Up,” a motto P.W. Bright tried to instill in his sons. And hanging on a wall next to his desk is a framed letter Bright received from his father in 1959 while in college. In the letter, the elder Bright encourages his son to not run for president at the Sigma Nu fraternity during his senior year at WVU because the younger man was already president of the stu-

dent body and the university’s inter-fraternity council. The elder Bright wrote that he feared his son had over-extended himself and would become frustrated because he would not have enough time to do the fraternity president’s job to the level of perfection he would expect from himself.

“To be a great man, one must be a good leader, but to keep himself great, he must also be a good follower,” Bright’s father wrote to him. “I am mighty proud of you, Bill.”

Bright said that letter is still an inspiration to him, and a reminder of how proud his now-deceased father was of him.

And through the ups and downs, hard times and days of plenty, Bright said Patty has been there next to him, helping him along, sharing her opinion and offering suggestions.

“She’s always been involved in everything I do,” he said. “And she’ll tell me exactly the way things are. And in business, that’s really helpful.”

The two are partners in other ways, too. Both Bright

and his wife stay busy helping nonprofit groups throughout the state. Bright served on the advisory board of the Mary Babb Randolph Cancer Center at WVU, and he and his wife are involved in the **West Virginia Friends-R-Fun Foundation**, which is a nonprofit daycare and education center. In 1986, he formed the **P.W. and Jennie Bright Fund** to help cover medical costs for local children, and in 2005, the couple formed the **Bright Foundation**, which is dedicated to improving the quality of lives for less fortunate people.

In addition to those nonprofit activities and many others, Bright has been involved in the **West Virginia Roundtable**, the **West Virginia Chamber of Commerce**, the **West Virginia University Foundation** and the **West Virginia Manufacturer’s Association**.

Plus there is always his venture capital work to keep him busy.

“I enjoy being in venture capital. You don’t hit a home run very often, so it can be frustrating, but it is also very rewarding,” he said.

Bright is comfortable these days with the future of his businesses. His daughter **Anne** and her husband, **Darren Campf**, work in the family business. Anne serves on the board of **Bright Enterprises** and Darren is an attorney and the chief investment officer. But Bright, 69, said he has no plans to retire any time soon. He hasn’t even slowed down much.

“I may take a little more time off now than I did before. I’ll go skiing more and I may come into work a bit later these days, or I work from home a bit more, but I don’t think I’ll ever quit,” he said.

Of course he won’t — he’s having too much fun.