

EARLY HISTORY OF THE SENIOR STATESMEN OF VIRGINIA

by Gene Ecton Smith Davis
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Five strangers met in the fall of 1995 at the first Senior Leadership Program, which was a very pale copy by Senior Center, Inc. of the Leadership Charlottesville program of which Sue Liberman is a recent graduate. The program charge was \$150. The program was downsized the following year and transferred to the Jefferson Area Board for Aging for a third year where it was further downsized and ended.

We quickly realized it was a "Meet the Community Leaders"--not a "Leadership Training" program. The five of us (Joe Lieberman, Mike Ludgate, Grace Patrick, Ray Torrey and I) decided we could do better for less. We came up with a two part plan:

1. to create an organization which would allow seniors (then age 50 and older) to meet and interact with community leaders from our region and state at NO COST! We would address issues raised by members and community leaders.
2. to recreate the Virginia Silver Haired Legislature created by Governor Charles Robb for two sessions and carried over for one session by Governor Gerald Baliles. Governor Baliles ended it at the request of the Area Agencies on Aging which had an unfunded mandate to do the work.

We posted notices and spread the word about open organizing meetings--with refreshments--held at the Gordon Avenue Library at no cost. We wanted a bottom-up, not top-down, organization. In these open meetings we discussed and then selected by majority rule:

1. The name of the organization: "Senior Statesmen of Virginia" beat "Commonwealth Citizens" and others.
2. The mission of the organization: "The mission of the Senior Statesmen of Virginia is to enable seniors to identify and articulate their viewpoints on the issues affecting all the citizens of Virginia, to encourage knowledge of and active participation in the legislative process of government, and to disseminate information about the social, government and educational institutions offering support and assistance."
3. Membership: There would be two classes of membership: "state only" and "state and regional". The region would include Charlottesville and the five counties in Planning District Ten which are Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson.
4. Annual cost of membership: \$5.00 for state only members and \$15 for state and regional members of which \$5.00 would go to the state organization for insurance, annual corporate reports, etc.
5. Benefits of membership: The benefits of membership would be a monthly newsletter describing the programs past and present, and a vote on the activities of the organization and all issues championed.
6. Meeting place: The place to meet would be Northside Library in Albemarle Square which would also be free and had many more parking spaces than Gordon Avenue Library.
7. Meeting day: The day to meet would be the second Wednesday of the month as no one had a conflict that day.
8. Meeting time: The time of the meeting would be from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon to enable seniors to get morning chores done and enjoy lunch at home, in the dining rooms of retirement communities or meeting friends at a local restaurant before the meeting and beat the "going home" traffic after the meeting.

All this was accomplished in ever larger open meetings over several months with sometimes contentious discussion. Not all those attending these organizational meetings joined as members, but in the months and years ahead, most did.

The second Wednesday of February, 1996, we met at Northside Library and initiated the Senior Statesmen of Virginia and the Jefferson Branch of the Senior Statesmen of Virginia. Ten people paid \$15.00 to join. We then opened two checking accounts and the Senior Statesmen of Virginia and its Jefferson Branch were born.

Although we tried very hard with our second objective recreating a "Senior Legislature" modeled on the three "Virginia Silver Haired Legislatures" and the high school Boys State, Girl's State, and Model Assembly--we were not successful. We compiled a lot of data on these programs. Then we wrote a proposal which we took to the Virginia Department for the Aging, which had participated in the three Silver Haired Legislatures. Then Commissioner Thelma Bland planned an Area Agency on Aging statewide meeting to introduce the proposal. Governor George Allen issued a statewide mandate for No Advocacy by Any State Agency. That ended the plan for a statewide meeting, but some Department for the Aging staff tried to help us by giving us copies of the names and addresses of the participants in the three sessions. We mailed proposals to all of them, but they were age sixty and older eight to twelve years before and most had moved. A few joined our state organization. Commissioner Bland resigned and we met with her replacement, Commissioner Ann McGee. She told us, "We cannot support such an organization. What if you proposed something to which we disagreed?" So the government support was non-existent.

The three Virginia Silver Haired Legislatures were funded by donors found by the two Governors. Boys State is funded by the American Legion, Girls State by the American Legion Auxiliary, and the Model Assembly by the YMCA and YWCA. We had no such funding sources.

The state Senior Statesmen of Virginia was formed as an umbrella organization. We put on several annual forums, the major one being on Electric Deregulation which was coming to our state. We had no funds for publicity. Thus after a forum on Social Security with national representatives was not well attended, we stopped the state forums and merged the Jefferson Branch of regional programs into the state umbrella as the Senior Statesmen of Virginia.

The regional group was growing with community support and interest. In May of 1996 we invited representatives of the City of Charlottesville and the five surrounding counties to a brainstorming meeting and complimentary luncheon hosted by Westminster Canterbury of the Blue Ridge in their main building. We invited Deborah DiCroce, then president of Piedmont Virginia Community College, to give her inspiring talk on "Leadership" for the keynote speech. These leaders were asked to suggest issues SSV might tackle. Lot of ideas were forthcoming. We broke for the WCBR complementary lunch. Upon returning the group selected three broad categories under which most of the issues fell--education, government, and health. Thus the three committees of SSV were born. All of the participants joined SSV. By the end of the year we had one hundred members--twenty-five state members and seventy-five regional members. As we lost the state membership, the regional membership expanded and we usually averaged around one hundred members each year.

The three committees held their own meetings--sometimes with speakers. Each committee chose regular meeting speakers in their own fields of interest. They also initiated several important projects.

The most attended programs are the Candidates Showcases for General Assembly and the Fifth District Congressional races. We planned a State Offices Candidates Showcase featuring Mark Early and Mark Warner for Governor, Tim Kaine and Jay Katzam for Lieutenant Governor, and Jerry Kilgore and Donald McEachin for Attorney General. We put a lot of time and effort into the planning of this event which would be held on September 12, 2001. All candidates cancelled the day before as a result of the events of 9/11.

The government committee tackled legislative bills and proposed issues for the members to support. They followed the legislative bills and resolutions proposed by our regional legislators and published those listings in the newsletter. Names, addresses and telephone numbers of all state legislators were published in the newsletter.

The health committee worked with the Thomas Jefferson Emergency Medical Services Council, UVa Health Sciences Center and Martha Jefferson Home Care to create an Emergency Medical Card. It was funded anonymously by an SSV member. It was distributed to patients at UVa and MJH and mailed to everyone in the Charlottesville/Albemarle area in a fundraising letter by the Charlottesville/Albemarle Rescue Squad. SSV purchased wallet-sized Senior Health Records in plastic sheaths, put the yellow Emergency Medical Cards in the sheaths and gave them to every member at that time. (Everyone at the luncheon today has an Emergency Medical Card at your place at the table.) The important information is the two medical history numbers you have at UVa and/or MJH. With those numbers, your medical history can be pulled up on any emergency team's computer--even as far away as the West Coast. In an accident or other emergency it can be life-saving.

The education committee distributed information on Albemarle County's Gold Card which allows senior residents age sixty and older to free admission to school sponsored concerts, plays and events at local schools. Any senior resident can pick up a free Gold Card by applying to the Albemarle County School Superintendent's office.

The education committee brought a professor from Northeastern University in Massachusetts together with SSV members who belonged to the engineer organization IEEE to replicate a middle school science program called RE-SEED--Retired Engineers in Science Education with Experiments and Demonstrations. SSV retired engineers were trained and given the experiments and demonstrations to use. These programs were accepted in several public and private middle schools in the region. Once begun, SSV turned over management to CASBA, the Charlottesville Albemarle Business Alliance.

Senior Statesmen members lobbied the Albemarle County School Board by telephone calls, e-mails, faxes, letters and attendance and speeches at the Albemarle County School Board meeting to name the new elementary school on Proffit Road for two outstanding SSV members: John Baker, the first black Albemarle County School Board member and chairman, and the first director of Piedmont Virginia Community College's Downtown Branch in Charlottesville; and James Butler, the first black Chief of a Virginia Extension Service, first black elected to the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors and a member of the Board of Directors of Piedmont Virginia Community College. Both men, now deceased, lived to join their families and friends in the inauguration celebration of Baker-Butler Elementary School in Albemarle County.

Senior Statesmen of Virginia does not ask for donations and does not present programs at meals for which a charge is made. It is run entirely by volunteers. There is no staff. We offer mental stimulation and socialization on a monthly basis. The dues of \$15 have not changed since the inception in 1996. We hope you believe your membership is a wise investment.