



THE NORTH CAROLINA CHAMBER
PROUDLY PRESENTS ITS

AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED PUBLIC SERVICE TO

THOMAS W. ROSS

FORMER PRESIDENT,
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM

A passion for justice has been a part of Tom Ross' life from some of his earliest working experiences.

From his time interning with Legal Aid while in college, to his time as a litigator in Greensboro, and throughout his 17 years as a state superior court judge, Ross has always fought against injustice and inequality.

During Ross' time on the bench, the General Assembly created a Sentencing Commission which had the goal of helping develop solutions to a number of the state's problems, including overcrowded prisons and ineffective sentencing. Ross was chosen as the chair of the commission and spent about nine years on the project.

"I said to the commission in my very first set of remarks, 'Our system is broken, it is a disaster, and we all know that. So if we can make it just a little bit better, we've been successful. We don't have to make it perfect, we just have to make it a little bit better.' And I think we made it a lot better," he said.

"Here we are in 2016, so more than 20 years after implementation, and the system is working well," he said. "We've controlled our prison costs significantly, and we don't incarcerate anywhere near the percentage of people that we used to, and we've saved the state billions of dollars, yet public safety has not been compromised at all."

After nearly a decade working on the sentencing commission, Ross was appointed director of the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts for two years before being recruited to become the executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem.

There, Ross worked to develop domestic violence programs around the state, worked in land conservation and the environment, was active in energy conservation and renewable energy projects, and supported the Clean Smokestacks Bill, among a variety of other causes.

"That was a big change in my career," he said of the move to the foundation. "I loved my work there, and I would have never thought about leaving."

But after six years, Ross was contacted about becoming president of Davidson College, his alma mater. At the time, he'd never considered a role in higher education, but once the idea was planted, he realized that it might be a position he'd enjoy. Several interviews later, he was offered the job as president.

"I was overwhelmed," he said. "And, frankly, very nervous when I first started because I didn't know how the faculty would react to a non-academic. But it was an interesting time, and things went well. I loved it for sure, and I think we got along well and did a lot of good things."

During his time there, Ross focused on developing a strategic plan for the college, which included broadening the curriculum and adding interdisciplinary opportunities.

Then after about three years as president at Davidson, Ross was once again contacted about a job he wasn't so sure he was interested in — president of the University of North Carolina system.

"I said no thank you, I'm happy where I am, life's good," said Ross. "But I kept getting contacted by a number of people strongly urging me to take the job, and I increasingly felt the public responsibility and call to take the position. It was the hardest decision I've ever faced, but ultimately I think the sense of the responsibility to do the job for the state I grew up in and love just overwhelmed me, and I said yes."

During his five years as system president, Ross faced challenging times, but his hope is that he has contributed to the system's success.

"I think we leave the place in pretty good shape, given everything that we've been through. We've managed the cuts, we've managed the transition, and I think the university is in good shape to move forward."

Looking forward in his own career, Ross said that he would like to find a position in which he can continue to do meaningful work and make a difference in the community. He seems to be on track to achieve that goal, as recently he

was named the first Terry Sanford Distinguished Fellow at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. In this new role, Ross will focus on a variety of policy issues, including independent redistricting.

For North Carolina, Ross sees a similarly bright future, provided the state continues to place a priority on education.

"I think a focus on talent development and education, particularly higher education, is going to be critical for North Carolina if we're going to remain competitive.

"North Carolina has been a great state for all of us, and we want for it to stay that way. But it won't stay that way automatically. We have to invest in the future and come together to find solutions to the challenges we face."

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