

Beginning With The End In Mind

In Good Company:
Mr. Russell

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“Land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it’s the only thing that lasts.”

-Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With The Wind*

Nestled near Alexander City, Alabama, along the banks of Lake Martin and spanning 25,000 acres through pastures, pines, and hill crests is Russell Lands. From SpringHouse, the James Beard-recognized restaurant that sits atop the grounds, the view is breathtaking and timeless in a way that few developed properties remain. Envisioned and painstakingly maintained by Mr. Russell, who has stewarded his family’s land for most of his life, Russell Lands is a time capsule of sorts, much like its overseer and chairman of the board.

Ben Russell greets his staff and visitors with a boyish smile, a soft chuckle, and the kind of earnest eye contact that instantly warms the room and the hearts of those around him. It is easy to tell he is well-loved by his staff. His handshake is strong, and his hands are calloused from many years of hard work. He exudes a quiet confidence and poise, but he doesn’t have a poker face. His

gaze reveals, at times, more than his words: nostalgia, determination, softness, and even a little mischief. Mr. Russell speaks softly and intimately, captivating his listeners and drawing them close, as the lines and the emotions so easily read on his face tell the story of a man who has lived many lives in one lifetime.

Conservationist, philanthropist, entrepreneur, innovator, author, pilot, and painter, it’s nearly impossible to translate the breadth of Mr. Russell’s career. When initially asked about his line of work, he doesn’t say much about himself but begins to reminisce about his grandfather, “Mr. Ben,” who first settled the Russell family in Alexander City, founded multiple Russell businesses, including Russell Corporation, the well-known athletic wear manufacturer. The history of the Russell family and their successes is more than just a talking point. It is the bedrock for what Mr. Russell hopes to impart in what, to him, is still very much a family company.



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That sense of family isn’t just the foundation of Mr. Russell’s business philosophy—it’s the guiding principle of his preservation and philanthropic efforts.

Preservation of Russell Lands and Lake Martin is a mission Mr. Russell takes with great seriousness, but not without a sense of imagination. From repurposing sawmill residue and scrap wood to producing energy in order to fuel Russell Corporation, to engineering a method of carbon-neutral “mobile gasification,” to powering a vehicle and Mr. Russell himself across the country, the innovative mind has a long history of environmental vision. Mr. Russell has dedicated himself to master planning a sustainable infrastructure for Russell Lands’ development, from over 100 miles of hiking trails to the architecture, landscaping, and sewage system. The impeccably maintained stables and equestrian center, as well as a sundial intended for outdoor classroom use, were all designed by Mr. Russell himself, as was the chandelier that is the focal point in the Russell Crossroads Discovery Center. It’s obvious that Mr. Russell has a finger in every pot of his business, but he’s not a micromanager. He attributes his success to the employees who make up his company. “Success boils down to three things: relationships, reputation, and trust. What I’ve done right is hire the right folks and surround myself with good people,” Mr. Russell insists.

What Russell Lands’ ecological efforts are to preserving the past, the Russell family’s philanthropic efforts are to providing for the future. Mr. Russell and his wife Luanne established Children’s Harbor in 1989 as a recreational center for children with serious illnesses, and their families. What began as a dollar-for-dollar fundraising effort has grown into a network of programs developed to assist families in need of financial aid, counseling and educational programs, and specialized medical care through Children’s Harbor’s Family

Center in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified Benjamin Russell Hospital for Children.

The 12-story, \$400 million facility was named for Mr. Russell’s beloved grandfather, “Mr. Ben,” who instilled a sense of social responsibility early on in Mr. Russell’s youth. “We were expected to help others growing up. It started in the church. We were always raising money or providing meals for families who were less fortunate than we were,” Mr. Russell recounts. When asked about his motivation for this most recent venture, his response is impassioned. “There’s a lot we can’t cure yet, but what we can cure are difficult circumstances.” He continues, “Illness affects a whole family. What happens if mama or daddy loses their job because they’ve got a little one in the hospital? I want them to know they’re supported.”

That’s a sentiment that hits close to home for the Russell family. Shortly after the Benjamin Russell Hospital for Children opened, Mr. Russell’s own grandson was diagnosed with lymphoma and successfully treated at the medical center. “There’s a very thin veil that separates those who are fortunate from those who are not. I can do something, so I ought to.”

As he gazes out the rain-drenched window to survey the landscape of what has been his life’s work, Mr. Russell recounts story after story. The lion’s share are anecdotes from his childhood: pranks and early indications of an entrepreneurial mind, such as the frog gigging business that supplied frog legs to Kowaliga Restaurant (yes—the same Lake Martin outpost that inspired the famous Hank Williams song). Others are lessons learned from the inevitable failures that accompany the hard-earned successes of a career that has spanned over six decades. Having built a legacy on both bloodline and landline is no small feat, and as Mr. Russell says with a grin, “That’s another blessing from above.” □