



Clemson Legacy Connection

PLANNED GIVING NEWSLETTER



The Road Less Traveled — Ed Presnell '71, June 2026

What if the flip of a coin could change the course of your life?

For Clemson alumnus Ed Presnell '71, it did. On a quiet afternoon more than five decades ago, a young man from Asheboro, North Carolina, stood at a crossroads. One path would keep him close to home, surrounded by familiar faces and familiar places. The other led to a university he had never seen, in a state where he knew few people. Unable to decide, Ed reached into his pocket and flipped a coin.

Most of us have moments like that—when life seems to hold its breath while we make a choice. Looking back, we often realize those decisions were about far more than a college, a career or a place to live. They became the turning points that shaped who we would become.

For Ed, that simple coin toss opened a door to friendships, mentors, opportunities and experiences that would influence the rest of his life. Today, whenever he returns to Clemson for the Golden Tiger Reunion, he is reminded that the campus is more than brick pathways, classrooms and traditions. It is a place where lives are transformed.

And few understand that better than Ed.

Education was always the goal

Ed was born after his father returned from WWII. “My father went to war instead of college,” Ed says. His father landed on Omaha Beach during D-Day and was a proud member of the “Greatest Generation.”



Ed’s parents instilled in their three children the importance of furthering their education.

“Asheboro is a place where academia is a priority, as it is near four major universities and several smaller ones,” he stated. “My mother eventually earned two master’s degrees while serving as a teacher and later a guidance counselor. My two younger sisters each earned multiple degrees as

well. So, we were taught to value education, and college was expected of us,” Ed added.

Decisions, decisions

When it came time to think about applying to colleges, Ed, of course, considered North Carolina institutions. However, his father suggested that Ed look into Clemson due to its strong engineering programs. Ed applied to Clemson sight-unseen, and then had a decision to make when he was accepted. Stay in North Carolina or take the road less traveled to Clemson?

Ed’s coin toss sealed the decision; however, he says he considered following it up with a “best of three” coin toss because most of his friends would be attending college in North Carolina. Something told him to stay true to his original coin flip, so he and his parents made the drive to Clemson to check out the campus.

The rest is history.

A promise made beside a hospital bed

What appeared to be a fortunate beginning at Clemson quickly became a difficult journey. Like many first-year students, Ed struggled with homesickness. Classes were challenging. He questioned whether he belonged. More than once, he considered transferring.

Life took a very unexpected turn during Ed’s sophomore year, when he received an emergency phone call to come home. His father was not doing well after a surgical procedure, so Ed, who didn’t have a car, hitchhiked the 250 miles home and went straight to the hospital.

As he sat at his unconscious father’s bedside, he promised his dad he would graduate from Clemson. Ed said that his father squeezed his hand, and 45 minutes later, passed away. The loss was devastating.

At just 19 years old, Ed suddenly found himself carrying both grief and responsibility. Yet that promise became his compass. No matter how difficult the road became, he would finish what he had started.

The people who helped Ed find his way

Promises alone never carry us through life's hardest seasons. People do.

As Ed worked to overcome academic struggles and personal loss, Clemson faculty and staff stepped forward to help him succeed. Col. Rick Robbins, an academic counselor, provided guidance and encouragement. Economics professors Dr. Hugh Mccaulay and Dr. Bruce Yandle challenged him intellectually while helping him discover a field that fit his strengths. Dean of Men, George Coakley, offered Ed support during one of the most difficult periods of his life.

Those mentors helped Ed realize something profound: success is rarely achieved alone.

"Clemson invested in me," he said. "People cared enough to help me when I needed it most."

Changing his major to economics became another defining moment. His grades improved. His confidence returned. The future once again seemed possible.

Looking back, Ed identifies three pivotal turning points in his life: the coin toss, the loss of his father and the decision to change majors. "Those were crossroads decisions," he recalled. "I believe our choices become the prisms through which we see our lives."

Paying it forward

After graduation, Ed built a successful career in insurance, banking, telecommunications and economic development. He served as president and CEO of the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce and became a respected leader in his community. However, success was never the destination. Service was.



The values his parents taught him—integrity, generosity and helping others—continued to guide him. Through countless community efforts, including Rotary International, Ed devoted himself to making a difference. Ed said that he strives to live by the Augusta Rotary Club’s standards of truth, fairness, goodwill and service to others.

Throughout his life, Clemson has remained close to his heart. He helped establish the Clemson Club in Augusta, served on Clemson's Board of Visitors and remained deeply engaged with the University. Over time, however, his perspective evolved.

What began as a passion for Clemson Athletics grew into a deeper appreciation for Clemson's academic mission and its power to transform lives. He began thinking about what Clemson had meant to him, and what it would mean for future generations.

A legacy beyond a lifetime

When Ed updated his estate plans, he included Clemson University. The decision was not about recognition. It was about gratitude.

It was about honoring the parents who taught him the value of education. It was about remembering the professors and mentors who helped him find his footing when he felt lost. It was about creating opportunities for students whose lives, like his own, may one day be changed by a caring mentor, a scholarship, a classroom experience or a chance they otherwise might never have received.

“I rewrote my will with the idea that helping future Clemson Tigers would be my gift to Clemson,” Ed said. “No fanfare; I’m just doing what needs to be done. I believe the sum of the parts adds up: if everyone does what they can, we can collectively pay it forward and make a difference in the University we all love,” he said.

However you would like to make an impact on Clemson’s present or future, we encourage you to visit our [website](#) to explore areas of interest or you can always contact the Office of Trusts, Estates and Gift Planning at giving@clemsion.edu. We also encourage you to review and download our free [Estate Planning Guide](#) to help you navigate important decisions before meeting with an attorney and financial advisers. And I would love to hear from you directly at jovanna@clemsion.edu or 864-656-0663.

What decision would you make with a coin toss?

As I further reflect on Ed's story, I find myself returning to that coin toss. At the time, it may have seemed like a simple choice between two colleges. But looking back, it was so much more. On one side of the coin was the life Ed knew. On the other was a future he could not yet imagine — a future filled with life-long friendships, mentors, opportunities, challenges, triumphs and a Clemson degree that would shape the rest of his life.

Most of us can identify a similar moment in our own journey. Perhaps it wasn't a coin toss, but it was an important decision, a risk, an opportunity or an act of faith that changed everything. Those moments remind us that our lives are often shaped not by the choices we make, but by the people and institutions that pour into us and help us grow and mature along the way.

Today, each of us holds a different kind of coin in our hands — the unique opportunity to decide what impact our lives will have on those who come after us. You, too, can make provisions to ensure that future generations of Clemson students will have access to life-changing education, caring mentors and transformative experiences that have meant so much to you.

Years from now, a student may echo your name, in a spirit of gratitude, for the decision you made to invest in their future. You can intertwine your story with theirs as they discover their potential and purpose and fulfill a dream or overcome a challenge because someone cared enough to invest in their Clemson Experience.

Perhaps that is the true lesson of Ed's coin toss. The most important choices are not always the ones that change our own lives. Sometimes, they are the ones that change someone else's.

Ever loyal and forever grateful,
JoVanna King