

SALINE RECORD

Thursday, March 3, 2011 :: Volume 2 :: Issue 9

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About Benton**

**Former Coca-Cola exec Gary James
takes helm at Benton Area Chamber
as Executive Director Eddie Black retires**

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Passionate About Benton :: Former Coca-Cola exec Gary James takes helm at Benton Area Chamber

By Casey Penn :: Contributing Writer

Loyal. Determined. Energetic. A bulldog of sorts. All are descriptions befitting a born leader — which Gary James must be.

Otherwise, it's hard to explain why, throughout his career, people keep asking him to run things. Of course, nobody said he was above dropping a hint now and again.

On March 1, James officially took over as executive director of the Benton Area Chamber of Commerce, replacing Eddie Black, who held the position since 2008.

Sitting in the chamber boardroom, the two men described the circumstances that led to Black's exit and James' arrival.

"It all started a couple of years

ago," recalled James. "I started working with Eddie on a few different projects. We got a taste of what it was to work together locally."

A few months later, James began to tease Eddie once in a while. "I'd say 'When you're ready to leave, I'm ready to walk in.'"

James was kidding at first, but over the past year, the jokes led to some longer conversations and realizations. "God's timing is something that we both count on," he said, "and it all came together in December."

"You know God opens doors," Black added with a grin. "There was a front door open for Gary and a back door open for me."

Kidding aside, Black indicated, too, that it was a natural progression

— or succession — that led to the Board's hiring of James to take over the role. Black, though committed to the Chamber, had not intended to stay indefinitely. Leaving the Chamber staff will allow Black more time with his family. He also has plans to be more actively involved in the Saline County Economic Development Commission.

Meanwhile, James was nearing retirement and looking for something to do.

Not that he hadn't done enough already. James retired from Coca-Cola at the end of December 2010 after having served the company since 1977.

"I started as a helper on a route truck," he recalled. "When they

interviewed me, the first thing I said was, 'Can I run the place?'"

He did take charge, too, but only after years of proving his worth. James worked first in different areas of delivery and then sales before beginning his tenure as a supervisor.

He developed a strong work ethic in no small part due to the influence of his Arkansas-born and —bred wife, Renee.

"I owe it all to her," he said. "In the early part of my career, others would call in sick and I'd tell my wife, 'Look, other people call in. I think I'm going to do it today.'" She'd have none of it.

His hard work paid off in 1991 when James was offered his first chance to "run the place," but the

victory turned bittersweet when he found out that place — a Coca-Cola plant — was in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

"I packed my family, and as we left, in our rear-view mirror, we saw Benton," said James. "My wife was crying, my kids were small, and I wondered if I was making the right decision.

"They cried for about two years."

This tough time for the James family didn't last too long. By 1994, James was back in Arkansas, running the company's Jonesboro plant. "Just leaving one state and coming back to Arkansas was such a thrill," he recalled. "It was that 'home' kind

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of feeling ... just glad to be back near someone like you.”

If that wasn't good enough, Coca-Cola asked James, in 1997, to come back to where he started: the Little Rock plant. Since then, he and his family have been able to live back in Benton, the place they call home.

“My roots are here, and I am so glad to be back. I owe a lot to this city,” said James. “My work ethics, the public education I gained in this city are all a big part of me.”

James is a big part of the city, too. Since the late 1990s, he has taken part in the community wherever he can. He is chairman of the Salt Bowl Committee and holds memberships on the Saline Memorial Health Foundation Board and the Arkansas Rice Depot Board.

He's passionate about bringing people in the area together, especially in Benton.

“Through Coca-Cola, I had the time and ability to be involved in community service in Benton and in other cities,” he explained. “Through it all, I've realized that how you're raised, your family, your home, and your hometown streets — these all mean a lot to how your career develops. I am one of the

fortunate ones to have a great career and to enjoy it and turn around and give something back to this city.”

Speaking of giving back, a role at the Benton Chamber seemed like a perfect fit — not only to James but also to the board members who asked him to take on the position.

During the planning for last year's Saline Summer Daze, outgoing board member Matt Brumley got to know James pretty well. “I've had the opportunity to work with Gary on multiple projects, but during that project I spoke with him daily,” recalled Brumley. “His energy was contagious and he worked tirelessly for the betterment of this area.”

Prior to the Board's making any decisions regarding a changing of the guard, Brumley spoke with James about his plans and spoke with Black about his.

“Gary working with the Chamber, and Eddie working with SCEDC, is a huge step in the right direction. It doesn't feel like Eddie's leaving and Gary's moving in. It's more like we're adding Gary to a team that's already in place.”

Now that James is leading team Chamber, he's ready to put his trademark energy to work. He'll start by capitalizing on the talent of those

around him. “Eddie, Jerry and Paul Lovett have done a fine job,” he said. “I'm so excited to see members walking in here asking to serve on this or that committee. I hope to bring in a little more energy and add excitement wherever I can.”

“My vision is to see our county government and our school systems and our Chamber of Commerce really lock arms and become a real strong support system for each other,” he said. “I think our city needs that. I think our citizens need it.”

Is camaraderie among city officials possible?

It is happening already, according to James. “In the past three years, I think we've made movement towards that. I think we all notice that we need to be together,” he said. “The leaders of all three of those segments are embracing that now.”

Regular, shared meetings among certain groups (city council, chamber board, school board, etc.) have begun to foster discussion of ongoing concerns and obstacles facing each unique entity. “I think we'll find out that we all have the same goals, but we have different obstacles to getting there.”

As James looks at bringing more cohesion through

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James is shown in his Little Rock Coca-Cola office last fall, before he retired there in December. **ON THE COVER:** Gary James, left, has taken over the helm at the Benton Area Chamber of Commerce from exiting Executive Director Eddie Black, right.

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his work for Chamber, Black will be looking at ways to promote economic development. So far, James is unaffiliated with SCEDC, but is supportive and very interested.

The Chamber building houses the SCEDC office, which is fitting to Black. "It all works together," he said. "You can't divorce what the Chamber does, and what the city does and what an economic development entity like SCEDC does. There's a golden thread that runs through it all."

"Golden thread?" James grinned, rolling his eyes. "That's good. I'm going to use that somewhere today."

Clearly, these men are friends, colleagues. Black took James' comment in stride and continued his thought, which was to explain

the difference between the Chamber and SCEDC. The Benton and Bryant Chambers are each tied to a municipality.

"Their focus, typically, is on retail business development," he said. "SCEDC, in pattern with the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, focuses on non-retail business development. That's the delineation.

"SCEDC has had projects all the way from East End with their mega site certification to Paron's Project Arrow, where we spent a huge amount of time working on the Boy Scout Jamboree site, with help from the state," said Black. "While there are pretty clear lines, we all support each other."

During a recent farewell reception given in Black's honor, Eddie thanked the Chamber members for their support. He also thanked his wife for keeping him busy.

Later, Brenda Black



Photo by Matt Burks

Gary James, left, is taking over at the Benton chamber as Eddie Black, right, is retiring as executive director.

shared the real reason she's so supportive of Eddie's work. "I married Eddie for love, not lunch," she smiled. "When I see him watching Oprah in the afternoon, it's time for him to get back to work."

That's a problem that Renee James shouldn't run into for a long time.

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creative director of Pennwords Writing & Design, a print and web design provider. Penn's byline appears monthly in the Journal of the Arkansas Medical Society, where she covers health topics of interest to the state's

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