

# BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR **BENNIE L. HARRIS** SPEAKS WITH  
WITH **ALLEN SMITH**, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF **ONESPARTANBURG INC.**



*Allen Smith (left) and Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D.  
Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate*

**Welcome to Below the Line**, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Allen Smith, president and chief executive officer of OneSpartanburg Inc. (This interview has been edited for content, clarity, and length.)

**Harris:** Let's start at the beginning. Can you tell me a little bit about where you're from and what it was like for you, growing up?

**Smith:** I was born and raised in Greenville, North Carolina, right in between Raleigh and the coast. I was the son of a teen mom. My parents got hastily married and were together for about eight years, then got divorced. At that point in time, my mom was a single mom of three boys. My dad was still very much involved, but they were divorced. She was a receptionist at a law firm.

My grandparents were so involved in my life — my granddaddy particularly. He has polio. Still living and thriving. But he really came from nothing. He had an alcoholic, absent father. His mother raised five on her own. They were very, very poor. And he really worked hard. He never became rich, but I learned so many lessons from him about what it means to be a father, what it means to be a husband, and what hard work looks like.

He's always been my hero.

I think sometimes, you know, people may see my suit now and they may see the big job title. But I can understand the plight of a lot of people. And I think that's helped me with my role.

I was a first-generation college student, fortunate enough to be admitted to East Carolina University in my hometown. I struggled

mightily. Folks would come up to me and say, "Have you seen the syllabus?" And as someone from a family where no one has a four-year degree, that term just wasn't familiar. Everything was foreign to me. I had a lot of maturing to do as well.

I got put on academic probation. I remember my grandfather said, "I don't know much about this college game, but should you at least try to have a whole number on your GPA?" And I said, "Yes, sir."

What really turned me around was meeting a young lady, who is now my wife. She basically said she was not going to be with somebody who was going to flunk out of college.

So, I got serious. And that's when I started thinking about career. I decided I wanted to be a city manager or a county manager. So, I started in that direction, majoring in political science.

**Harris:** How did you end up becoming interested in, and focused on, economic development?

**Smith:** I worked in cornfields, I worked at Chick-fil-A, I worked at a law firm. But then I interviewed in front of a mayor and six town commissioners to be the town clerk for a small town in eastern North Carolina called Bethel. And I was fortunate enough to be blessed enough to get that role. It was an incredible exposure to local government. In a town that small, you are town hall. I mean, I was doing everything from processing payroll to issuing an order to public works because a pothole needed to be fixed — everything.

We didn't really have a lot of economic development cooking but, long story short, there was a vice president role that opened at the Greenville North Carolina Chamber of Commerce. I was woefully underqualified. But I applied and ended up getting it. And that's

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when I really got exposed to a chamber of commerce.

I still was able to see the impacts of economic development and the impacts a chamber can have. I'll tell you something else: I respect the heck out of city managers. You report to a city commission or town commissioner or county council. Your bosses are sent to you by the people. And they can literally change every year depending upon the outcome of an election. So that may have been one of the reasons why I got out of that game and decided that I wanted to go to an organization to still interact with board members.

So here we are, almost 20 years later, and I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

**Harris:** And for 10 years now, you've been CEO of OneSpartanburg Inc. For those who aren't familiar, could you provide an overview of what the organization does?

**Smith:** The organization was previously known as the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce. But there was a separate economic development organization, a separate tourism organization, a separate chamber. You have all that overhead. And you really have an opportunity to capitalize on synergy, but you're divided by silos and fiefdoms and competition for attention and budgets and so on and so forth. So, in September of 2020, we said no more in Spartanburg. We consolidated the work of business, economic, and tourism development and created OneSpartanburg Inc. On day one, we cut our overhead by 48 percent.

It's the only consolidated model of development in North and South Carolina. We're more effective and more efficient.

**Harris:** With that model, what sorts of things has the organization been able to accomplish?

**Smith:** My history only goes back 10 years, but in those 10 years, we've recruited 243 projects, 17,438 new jobs, and \$12 billion in new investment. That's a run that hasn't been matched in South Carolina. Measurable impact is incredibly important. I am so proud when I see someone wearing a Corri-gan uniform or an Oshkosh uniform, knowing that our organization helped someone on their journey to get to a different economic plane.

**Harris:** You're known for this high level of energy, innovation, and your leadership style. What core principles guide your approach to leadership, especially in the context of community and economic development?

**Smith:** Purpose. I need to be tied to a purpose. I need to know that what I'm going to do is going to have a greater impact. That drives me. It motivates me. I think it's energizing. I think it's one of the reasons why we've got the best team that we've ever had.

We understand the stakes are high.

**Harris:** What have been some of the challenges faced by the Upstate, in terms of economic development?

**Smith:** When textiles left the Upstate, 50,000 jobs were gone. All of our eggs were in one basket. We were solely focused on textiles. Over the past 25 years, we've replaced those jobs and then some. But back in 2016, when we started our strategic planning process, the facilitator said, "You're heading in the similar direction in terms of advanced manufacturing. It's your bread and butter. It always will be. But your job composition is way out of whack in terms of tilting heavy in that direction."

We realized we needed to look at diverse offerings in our economic development approach so we could withstand changes in economic conditions. But one of the impediments to that has been education attainment. We have to raise our education attainment rates if we want to be competitive for life science jobs, corporate HQs, regional back offices, and so forth.

So now we've got somebody in talent that's focused on education attainment. If they're successful, that means the economic development team can be successful in recruiting some of these life science knowledge-based jobs. And they're all in the same building. They're all under the same roof, literally talking with each other every single day.

**Harris:** So how has the Upstate gone about replacing those 50,000 jobs that were lost when the textiles industry left the region?

**Smith:** The BMW plant came to Spartanburg because they saw something in that displaced textile worker cohort. BMW saw that these people understand hard work. They're committed, they're dedicated. They've been doing work with their hands. That's one of several reasons we won that project. The BMW plant in Spartanburg changed the game. But I will say they aren't the only game in town anymore. We're seeing a beverage cluster emerge. There's more to come. Our economy is slowly but surely diversifying. We have been able to land some corporate HQs in downtown Spartanburg.

**Harris:** What role does education play in that?

**Smith:** It's absolutely critical. I think it's one of our strongest suits. We have seven institutions of higher learning in Spartanburg County. So, we need thousands more degrees, because in the world of economic development, particularly in site selection, when they're looking at degree attainment, we have to have the right numbers or we don't even make some lists.

We're going to get on lists we never were before. I believe the path to that is USC Upstate.

**Harris:** OneSpartanburg has an ambitious goal of making Spartanburg the best place to live, work, and play in the South by about 2030. Can you tell me a little about that goal and the path to getting there?

**Smith:** Essentially Dallas, San Antonio, and Spartanburg were each given a \$50-million grant from Blue Meridian, which is a \$4.3 billion philanthropic fund. Those three communities would get the money on the condition that they would raise \$50 million themselves. Spartanburg did it first, before Dallas, before San Antonio. And so, we had \$100 million, because Russell Booker and his team have done such a good job.

So now we have between \$115 million and \$120 million to invest in economic mobility in Spartanburg County through 2030. So, there are all kinds of goals regarding kindergarten readiness, high school seniors persisting to college, and helping the 50,000 people in Spartanburg County who have some college and no degree. We want to get them back in the game.

It's ambitious, but I believe that we're going to get there and we're going to meet a lot of our metrics because we come together and we collaborate like no community I've ever been a part of.

**Harris:** I'd next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don't know what's going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what's at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.

**Smith:** There are always a lot of dynamics swirling around. So, one of the things that I've tried to prioritize is seeking to understand. It seems like the older I get and the more people I meet, the more I realize there is a lot that I don't know. So, I try to do everything I can to understand people.

Everybody is walking through something. We put on social media that everything's great, but everybody's walking through something. I love the iceberg illustration. You know, we've all seen it. You can see the top of the iceberg, but you can't see what's under the water. So, I'm always trying to seek to understand.

**Harris:** How would you describe yourself as a leader, and what do you think others would say about you, when asked what kind of leader you are?

**Smith:** Well, I hope folks would say that I lead with empathy. I hope folks would say that I'm effective. Skilled. I think people would tell you that I'm data-oriented as well. Life is so short. Our professional lives are so short. And as I said before, the stakes are so high. So, you can only analyze and aim and analyze and aim for so long. You've got to act at some point.

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Financial terms weren't disclosed.

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